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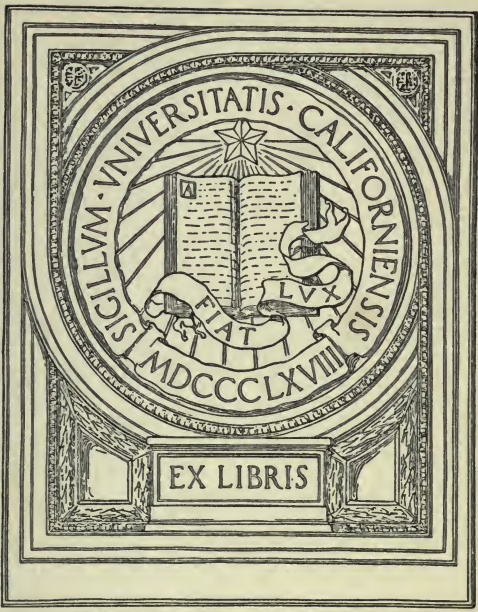
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A CHILD OF THE SLUMS.

A ROMANTIC STORY

Of New York Life Based Upon Martin J. Dixon's Play of the Same Name.

BY

GRACE MILLER WHITE,

Author of "Driven From Home," "Joe Welch the Peddler," "No Wedding Bells for Her," "Sky Farm," "A Midnight Marriage," "Souvenir Book of 'Way Down East'," "Why Women Sin," Etc., Etc.

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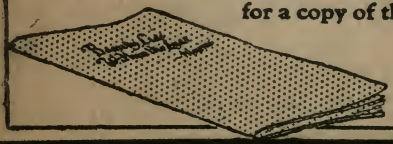

The Murine Co.
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A CHILD OF THE SLUMS

CHAPTER I.

A LARGE crowd of students were running from the Harvard College grounds down into the roadway. Their strong bodies swaying in the wind as they dashed on were indicative of strength and muscle. On and on, over the rolling hills and into the valley, panted the boys until they reached a spot where the long branches casting their shadows over the road spoke of cool retreats and lovers' nooks.

A little winding path led into the wood, but the boys did not make a move to enter.

"Are you sure this is the place?" said one.

"Well, isn't it the Three Corners? Ever since I have been in college I've known its name."

The speaker was tall, strong and handsome.

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He tossed the damp hair from his brow and proceeded:

"Now, fellows, you know that Frank is not the same boy he was two months ago. He is morbid, and I know something has happened. I say it is our duty to jack him up a bit. Now, Dick, what did he say over the 'phone?"

Richard Gerson thought a moment before replying. He did not wish to make his room-mate any trouble. But Frank had been so unsociable and uncommunicative of late. His handsome face bore an anxious expression as he lingered in his thoughts. For the three years in college he had been nearest to Frank Wentworth of all the boys. Their secrets had been shared with one another until they had been called by the rest of their fraternity "the Siamese twins."

But as Richard Gerson had said, Frank had forgotten the old days, and another love was filling up his life. The waiting man still waited, and the other five students kept silent.

Presently he said:

"I heard him tell the girl over the 'phone that he would meet her at the Three Corners as usual.

He seemed afraid that she would not come, for so many times did he entreat her that I thought he was going to spend the day with the receiver at his ear."

"And did his voice sound kind of mushy?" ventured a youth with eyes brimming over with mischief.

"Shut up, Sammy; what do you know of love?" This from another big fellow, chewing a straw.

"Well, I'll know enough not to let any of you know of it, don't worry, though I am not yet in such a dangerous position."

Saying this he gave a long leap, lighting upon his shoulders and turning a double somersault.

"Sit down, Sam," ordered the leader of the group. "This is no time for folly. Just remember this may be our first experience in drawing one of the fraternity before us. I don't like the look of this, but we cannot allow the name of the 'Frat.' to come to ill-repute."

It was Carl Duncan who had been gravely speaking. His mouth drew down at the corners while his blue eyes scanned the road toward the college.

Sammy accepted the rebuke and seated himself as much in the shadow as possible.

"I don't see why you fellows want to meddle in Frank's business," grumbled he. "I'd give you a fight for your money, and don't you forget it. The very idea that a fellow can't fall in love if he wants to! Don't every one of you have girls in the town that you call upon?"

"But we don't fall in love, Kid," answered Duncan, "nor make it apparent by our actions that something is going on. Frank Wentworth is a different boy, and it is well for his friends not to allow him to do anything rash."

"And we don't make our voices mushy over the 'phone, either, Sammy," put in Gerson, trying to soothe his conscience. He had brought the wrath of the "Frat." upon his friend, he knew, but no harm could possibly come of it—only a little fun.

"Maybe you wouldn't have heard the mush tone," replied the boy, "if you had not been listening. It's a mean shame to spy upon a fellow's heart affairs, I think."

"Go 'way back and sit down," laughed another,

"for, Sammy, you are young; it will be many days before you realize the fitness of things."

"I have an idea," began Duncan, peering into the wood, "that they will walk there," pointing toward a shady, well-worn spot. "If so, then we had better hide—I want to see it all."

"Horrid shame!" muttered Sammy, as he reluctantly followed the rest to a sheltered position where each pair of eyes could scan any scene which might be enacted close by.

Richard Gerson thought of the time when he had first met the boy he had betrayed to his college friends. He could well remember choosing him as his room-mate, and in all the three years that had followed he had not for one moment been sorry. They were both orphans, living with uncles when home. As he crouched behind a large moss-covered log Dick Gerson, as his friends called him, wished that he had allowed his receiver to rest upon the hook before he had heard his chum plead with some soft-toned girl that she meet him just this once at their trysting spot at Three Corners. And much more did he wish that, after hearing, he had kept it from the

other boys—but Duncan was holding up his finger as a warning for silence.

Each boy could hear the hum of a girl's voice in the distance and knew that she was coming toward them. The quiet that reigned was as absolute as if six living, breathing beings were not in hiding among the moss-covered logs. The constant twitter of the birds seeking their nests for the night filled the fast gathering dusk, while the twilight shadows fell from the trees as a warning that darkness was approaching.

Suddenly from some spot, and no boy afterward could tell from just where, a girl sprang into view. At first the twilight made it impossible to see aught but the graceful form as it neared the wood, but as she came into bold relief at the entrance every watcher, even Sammy, caught his breath. She hesitated a moment in her song, and ventured not into the shadows until she had anxiously peered for a witness among the trees. However, she seemed satisfied and walked straight toward the log behind which Richard Gerson, Carl Duncan and Sammy were in hiding. She seated herself and spread her

pretty skirts and proceeded to wait for the coming of her lover. "Good Lord," groaned Sammy, in Carl's ear; "ain't she a beauty? Any boy that doesn't forgive the mush tone for her ought to be licked!" The youth was effectually silenced by a severe jab from the other's elbow. He subsided and waited. The song was still rippling from the rosy lips of the girl:

"The hours I've spent with you, dear heart,
Are as a string of pearls to me."

The hum had broadened into words, and the students could hear the trembling lips sing to the coming lover that the hours spent with him had been as the incense from her rosary. Not one boy among the hiding number was not sorry that he had ventured upon such love as he intuitively felt the girl capable of. Her dark hair was coiled into a mass upon the unhatted head. The fair skin, as she sang, dimpled with blushes and paled with emotion. Once in a while she leaned far over and looked searchingly into the road, as if the coming of some one were the main object of her visit to the spot.

"I think I am a little early," the boys behind the log heard her murmur, softly. "But I'll wait," and again the song began:

"Oh, memories that bless and burn,
Oh, barren gain and bitter loss,
I kiss each bead and strive at last to learn to
kiss the cross."

Here the song ended, and the watchers saw her quiver as if striving with a storm. Then she rose from the log and waited in silence. The sound of rapid footsteps fell upon the six listening ears and six pairs of envious eyes saw their classmate clasp the beautiful form close to his heart while his lips rested upon the tender mouth raised to his. Richard Gerson from his point of vantage could see the intensity with which the girl was strained to the man's breast; he could hear the fluttering breath as his room-mate's companion struggled with her emotion.

"My sweetheart," whispered Frank Wentworth, "I was so afraid you would not come; I just had to see you."

The students in hiding each felt that he, too,

desired some girl to cling to him in that confiding way, the sentiment of which was enhanced by the shadows of the oncoming night. She answered not for a moment, but then said:

"It would have been better, dear, not to have come again, but I, too, wanted to see you and tell you how very much I love you."

"I know that you do love me, dear," whispered Wentworth, "but I so fear losing you that my heart stands still in fright. Tell me that you will never love another man as long as you live."

It had grown so dark now that the faces of the two lovers could be seen but dimly. The last flush of the sun had deepened into a dull grey, melting the shadows into one long strip upon the road.

The silent watchers resting on their mossy beds wished themselves anywhere but there when they noticed that the man drew the beautiful girl toward the log upon which she had first rested when coming into the wood.

"We will sit here for a few moments, Ruth, dear," said Wentworth; "for it will soon be time

for you to go. Does your auntie know that you are out here?"

"No, I ran away," smiled the girl. "Dear old auntie, how she would open her eyes if she only knew that I loved you!"

"Frank took the small hands in his. He pressed them to his lips with evident passion in his movements.

"And are you sure, my darling, that you do love me?"

"More than I can express. I can only tell you that a complete change has come over my life, and that you are the center of my universe."

Gerson heard the words, and so did Sammy.

The latter thrust his fist into his mouth to prevent a laugh that he was sure was coming. Only Duncan dropped his head in shame. He had not imagined that any such love was for Frank Wentworth.

"Will you marry me, Ruth, immediately?"

Each student held his breath to hear the answer.

"Not until you have finished your course. We are both too young yet to be thinking of getting

married, and then, too, I want to be sure of auntie's consent—she has been so very good to me since mother died," and the girl wiped away a tear.

Sammy gurgled behind the log.

"Did you hear a sound?" asked Ruth, looking around, startled.

"Nothing but the twittering of a bird," was her lover's answer.

"You see," went on the girl, "I have never had a lover before, Frank. Auntie doesn't know about you. If she did she would not allow me to come to the wood to see you."

"But, darling, when we love each other so very much it is right that we should be together. When a man loves a woman like I do you, there is no power on earth that ought to keep them apart. Do you understand, Ruth?"

The girl hid her face on the shoulder of the boy, while the silent students in watching nearby groaned inwardly.

"But you have promised to be my wife some day, Ruth, haven't you?" asked the student-lover, anxiously.

"Some day, oh, yes; I should be unhappy if I did not know that we are to be always in a little home of our own. I love you, Frank."

Richard Gerson smothered an oath as he listened, and Sammy gurgled down a laugh.

All the students, now sorry for their part of the game, would have given much had they been able to sneak out as quietly as they had come. But there was no way, and the lover was still entreating his sweetheart to love none but him.

"I cannot study now, dearest, unless I know just where you are. You would not love some one else besides me, would you?"

"No, indeed," chimed back the soft voice. The girl's face had been lost in the twilight. "I shall always love you and promise that when you are ready for me I shall follow you to the ends of the earth."

If the girl could have looked into the future and seen how two of those present were to figure in her life she would have shudderingly turned away, but her happy heart had not an inkling of what was coming, and she cooed out her affection for the man in whose arms she rested.

"I don't think I shall come again, dear Frank," said she, as the boy led her from the wood. "I think I am doing wrong. Auntie would feel that I had deceived her were I to go on this way. I'll tell you what I'll do," and each pair of hidden ears were strained to get a sound of the voice. "I'll ask auntie to let you come to the house, and if she will not, then I will remember that I am the same as your wife. When you are ready for me, come, and I shall go."

"Yum, yum," howled Sammy, as the lovers disappeared down the road, and six stiff students arose in the moonlight. "Yum, yum," said he again, smacking his lips.

"Shut up, Kid," gasped Duncan. "We made fools of ourselves, that's all I can say. Frank's welcome to his girl, if he wants her; she is a dandy."

"And any fellow here would be dying glad to have just such a one," put in Sammy, refusing to be squelched.

"Frank loves her and she loves him," said Gerson, "and I vote that we let the aunt decide whether he is to see her again."

"I say so, too," said the indomitable Sammy, "and if she is at all like an old maid aunt of mine she'll keep them so far apart that the girl will have but memories to bless and burn."

Sammy was now in the road, and the other five were following, rubbing their tired sides.

Duncan had said but little. He was thinking of a wee miss he loved in his far-away home. As they walked toward the college Gerson said, "What are you going to do, Prep?"

"Nothing that will make the little girl strive at last to kiss the cross."

Sammy hearing the sentimental remark, tossed his hat high in the air. "Listen to the professor, the sentimental Tommy," cried he. "Wouldn't that make you sick; he was the most strenuous to hear the love-making, and now listen!"

The little freshman received a large kick which he tried to escape, running as fast as his legs could carry him.

A private council held among the students of the Fraternity, to which Frank Wentworth belonged, ended in the decision that nothing should

be done to the member nor any steps taken which would make him unhappy.

* * * * * * *

When Ruth Ferris was alone that evening dressing for dinner she thought long upon the promise she had made to Frank. She would ask her aunt if she could have him call at the house. Ruth dreaded her relative's displeasure, but being a stout-hearted little maiden she finished her toilet and descended the stairs, where she found her aunt waiting dinner.

"You are late, Ruth, my dear," severely said the good woman. "I wish you would give up your jaunts in the wood and come in early enough to be at the table as the gong sounds. It will not be long before you have a home of your own. Remember, all well-conducted houses have a methodical mistress."

"But I do not want a house yet, auntie, and I could not live unless I went to hear the birds sing and to say good-night to the flowers. Please, dear, do not take this pleasure from me."

"Well, then, come in on time, or I shall have to curtail your liberty." There was such a frown

upon the lady's face that Ruth did not dare broach the subject of Frank, but as the meal proceeded and the wrinkles faded from the broad, smooth brow of Miss Ferris, Ruth plucked up courage, and when they were in the drawing-room she sank upon a little stool, where for years it had been her custom to be, and took her aunt's hand in hers.

"Auntie," she began, timidly, "I'm getting to be a big girl now, am I not?"

"Too big to wander in the brushwood and hunt birds' nests in the forest."

"Then if I am a young lady, should I not have the privileges of one?" This question caused the older woman to look searchingly into the pretty face.

"What do you mean? Do you not take lessons upon the piano, and have you not a French teacher?"

"Yes, but I have no lover, like the rest of the girls I know."

The ice was broken, and Ruth waited.

"Well, thank the Lord for that!" ejaculated the aunt. "If I should see one coming, I would

treat him the same way that I do the dogs that tramp upon my flowers, and don't forget it!"

"You would not shoot him, auntie?"

"Yes; I would fill him full of small shot as quick as a wink, so tell him to stay away."

Ruth shuddered as in her mind she could see poor Frank flying before the rage of her aunt, who had just sworn she would shoot him.

She did not speak for a long time, and then opened her lips, but closed them immediately.

"What were you going to say, Ruth?" asked the old lady.

"That I do love a dear boy, and wanted you to allow him to come and see me. Oh, auntie, if you only knew how much I want him all the time."

"Tut, tut, now none of that. If in your rambles about you have met one of those dreadful students, I bid you to forget him, and don't let me see him here."

Ruth heard the ultimatum with heavy heart. She knew that her aunt meant just what she said.

She simply acquiesced by a nod of the head, and with great dignity rose and walked to the

window. The wind had risen since dinner, and the long arms of the trees bent their branches in the moonlight. How often she had walked back from the woodland with her dear one, and how long would it be before she would see him again?

CHAPTER II.

RUTH sat with her pen suspended over a letter. Her eyes were suffused with tears, some of the bright drops having blotched the paper. Picking it up she read, in a half-audible voice:

"DARLING FRANK:

"It almost breaks my heart to write you this, but as auntie says it must be, then I say so, too. You know there is hidden in her breast an old dead love, for long ago a man cruelly trifled with her when she was but a girl. She insists that I shall not meet the same fate—not knowing, of course, your dear, noble self. I tried to argue with her, but it was of no use. She simply refused to listen and said all sorts of mean things about mankind in general. I shall not meet you at our trysting place again, but you know, my darling, that I love you. All the aunties in the

world could not tear that part from me. You will leave the university this year, and as soon as you are ready for me to come to you, you have but to call. I shall answer. I hope you will not take this too much to heart. You remember that I told you auntie was my best friend in all the world, and I cannot now be deceitful with her. Every night I shall pray for my lover, for when he goes out in the great city of New York he will need them. If it happens so, then I shall be able to bid you farewell. With kisses and love, I shall always be your own RUTH."

The girl folded the letter and with many sobs and tears sealed it. She walked slowly up and down the room, wondering what her life would be when the handsome youth she loved was no longer there. The day was stormy, in accord with the tumult of her heart. She could hear the rain beating upon the trees while the wind moaned among the pines, lashing the branches and filling the air with shrieks that sent shudders over Ruth as she turned toward the window.

Out in the distance she could see the long,

white, wet road over which her feet had sped toward yonder woodland to meet the boy to whom she had just sent the letter. By straining her eyes a little she could even discern the opening among the trees where for days past she had seated herself upon the log and waited for the sound of his footsteps. Sheets of water were being poured from the sky upon the bending trees, while the raging wind shook it off like some great mastiff shakes himself after a bath in the sea. This was a day in keeping with Ruth's feelings. She stood by the window, her tears falling fast, and watched the weeping sky. Suddenly she thought she saw Frank come from the wood, followed by another man who crept after her lover with silent footsteps. With great fascination she kept her eyes upon the spectral scene. Frank seemed to turn toward her while the other man kept in his shadow. Amid the falling drops she could see that the other was not as tall as Frank but much the same type.

Then came a part in the scene which called forth a groan from Ruth, and when she took her hands from her eyes the phantom had disap-

peared. The shadow man in the rear of Frank had with a mighty strength felled the girl's loved one to the earth. The heated imagination of Ruth could almost see the writhings of the fallen man. She turned away sickened, knowing that it was but a trick of her fancy, and looking again there were but the tossing branches and the long, white road shining wet with the drops of rain.

Ruth, with a dread of some future event which was going to happen to Frank, went to her own room to pass weary, lonely hours of waiting, and for what? She knew it would be years before she would be able to marry him; he was but a youth, and his way in the world hard to make. She had a small fortune and was the heiress of her aunt, also an old uncle. Frank knew this, for his uncle and Ruth's were firm friends, and once her lover had told her that he would ask his uncle to use his influence to persuade the aunt with whom the girl was living to allow the young people to see each other. It happened, though, that the old lady had no idea of being won over from her favorite position.

So the matter ended and Ruth and Frank were

kept apart. The days flew by and the summer time was at hand. Frank stood at the top of his class and received the highest honors the college could bestow.

Ruth watched, from her seat in the gallery, her boy as he entered the platform and delivered his essay. All the aunts and uncles were there, with the exception of the one Ruth lived with. She gave it as her opinion that it was a waste of precious time to sit under the Harvard flag and listen to a dozen or more orations which amounted to nothing in the end. But she had given Ruth her permission to go, and upon looking once more into the face of her lover the girl determined to speak to him. She felt that he would leave for the city the next day and that the town would know him no more. She waited until he had finished his speaking and had taken his seat. Three times he rose to bow to the audience which had realized the genius in him. Then while Richard Gerson was making his way to the platform, Ruth caught the eye of Frank. Slowly he rose to his feet again. The girl knew that he was coming to her. Fiercely as her heart beat

she waited outwardly calm and ready. She watched him as he made his way to the gallery steps and lost him in the crowd. But in an instant he was at her side looking deep into her eyes and questioning her mutely for a little conversation.

"Will you not come with me, only a moment, Ruth?"

The pain in his eyes was pictured in her own. Her heart swelled to a bursting point and she felt rebellious toward her aunt, who had laid down the stern law that she should not love this noble fellow who had already won her heart.

She followed him into the open air and he drew her into the shadow where no living eye could witness the love scene. Back into the girl's mind came the memory of the day in the rain, when she had seen a man steal from the shadow and strike her lover. It would have been better for her future if Ruth had noticed the handsome fellow who followed Frank to the platform. Would she have noted the resemblance in the two men, and would she have compared Richard Gerson

with the ghost that walked the wide road on that rainy day?

But Frank was kissing her and her arms were about his neck. For a few moments she would be happy, auntie or no auntie. They could hear the cheering of the spectators inside the room.

But the sound fell upon unresponsive ears, for Frank Wentworth had longed for this hour.

But such happiness was short-lived. With many a promise and repetition of fidelity the lovers parted to meet no more until the expiration of many weary years.

* * * * * *

Ruth's aunt died, leaving her a fortune and making the girl independent of the world. Her uncle, the friend of the uncle of Frank, also was dead, leaving a peculiar will. Ruth had been notified that she benefited by it to the extent of one hundred thousand dollars, while one Frank Wentworth would get the remainder if he married her.

Ruth had left her native town. It had been now two years since she had seen Frank. No word reached her, but somehow she felt that her

boyish lover could not have forgotten her. Each day she lived there reigned supreme the thought that she would see him.

But as years rolled away she became used to the oppressive silence and waited with a patience natural to a loving woman.

One day, before leaving the large house facing the white, lonely road which led to the woodland, Ruth received a letter from a school friend of her mother's.

Would she come to New York and pass some few months with their family? said the letter. She should go to the seaside and as a young heiress enjoy the privileges of good society.

So, accordingly, Ruth closed the house and went to New York.

Mrs. Mathers had been in boarding-school at the time Ruth's mother had been there. They had been the best of friends. The good woman took the pretty girl in her arms and kissed her, saying that from then on she should be her own daughter. It was such a change from the quiet of the college town, the bustle and commotion of the city, that at first Ruth could scarcely realize

it, but Mrs. Mathers forced her into the whirl of a winter in New York, which soon acclimated her.

Mr. Mathers was a lawyer of high degree, with a flourishing practice which kept him in the city the most of the summer.

Ruth was surprised at first, then delighted at the manner and customs which reigned between Mr. Mathers and his wife. The woman, satisfied that she alone was the sole occupant of her husband's heart, tantalized him until the quarrels and outbreaks became serious.

One afternoon about one year after the coming of Ruth, Mrs. Mathers told the girl that she thought it their duty to advertise for the missing Frank Wentworth—that a fortune was awaiting him, while a certain little maid would be in the seventh heaven of bliss at the sight of his face. Did not Ruth think that it was heartless to sit and wait for a man who might be in dire distress?

"Why, Ruth," said she, "what if he were ill and in need of friends? Now, as for me, I don't know the young gentleman, but I do appreciate

the fact that he is the cause of your throwing away so many good offers."

Ruth's face colored red. Her eyes drooped with a guilty expression. How many times since that last day, when she had stood in the shadow of the large college hall, had she rebuked herself for keeping a man in her heart who evidently cared nothing for her. If he was still true to his vows, would not Frank Wentworth have returned long ere this? Would he not have sent her some word of recognition before the passing of three years? With these thoughts in her mind she drew herself haughtily together, throwing off the desire to enter heartily into the scheme, and said:

"He will never be anything to me. You know the terms of the will are that if I refuse him, he is to have the money, or if he finds some one else to love, then the whole of it comes to me. I do not want it, neither do I need it, so I have arranged it that when he does put in an appearance I shall refuse him before he gets a chance to tell me that he preferred some one to me."

The tell-tale tears glistened in the bright eyes.

How she loved this recreant lover who was strenuously staying away! The only reason Ruth could think of was that he was either married or dead. She was judging him by herself—she could not stay away from him so long if it were possible to do otherwise.

Mrs. Mathers shook her head.

"I think, dear, that he has not been able to carry out his plans, and that is the end of it. He would not ask you to join him in poverty, and, knowing nothing about the will, he keeps in his retreat. I am of the opinion that he is living."

"Living or not, he is not for me," said Ruth. "I am too proud to force myself upon any man."

"So, so," said a voice at the back of them, and both ladies faced Mr. Mathers, with his red face beaming with genuine pleasure.

"My dear love," he whispered in his wife's ear, "you have no idea how delighted I am to find you home. I look upon a day only half finished when you are not for some hours a part of it."

"And I," answered back a sweet, cooing voice, "would like you with me every moment of the day."

The man sank into a chair beside his wife. He turned his eyes upon Ruth's troubled face. Being a lawyer he realized that something was brewing.

"In difficulty, little girl?" said he. "I suppose it is that obstinate young fellow who insists upon keeping himself in the background. I would no longer worry over him."

"Now, Mr. Mathers," cautioned Mrs. Mathers, "don't fill that child's head with nonsense. It is her duty now to take some steps toward finding Frank Wentworth. He may be a perfectly worthy young man."

"No doubt," drawled the lawyer; "he is probably settled in some office and married to some nice girl."

Ruth uttered a little cry. It sounded so cruel from the lips of another. She knew now that she had not believed that Frank had forgotten her. The thought was unbearable.

"Now, Mr. Mathers," expostulated his wife again, "are you not ashamed of yourself? I am of you; you should be more delicate than to men-

tion such a thing. Don't mind him, Ruth, he is a bear."

Ruth smiled through her tears. This was a challenge for a serious quarrel, like some she had often heard.

"Now, wife, not quite that four-legged animal," good-naturedly said the husband. "If I were half the beasts you have called me, I should have had your life long ago. Again, I say that Ruth is foolish in waiting longer for a missing man who knows that he has a sweetheart living somewhere."

"Shut up!" snapped Mrs. Mathers. "If you cannot say what you are asked to, then don't talk at all. You know that Ruth loves this boy."

The lawyer took a turn about the room. He blew his nose vigorously, which was always a sign that he was ready to fight.

"Madame," he answered severely, "don't give me such orders, you are but a faulty woman. I demand your respect."

Mrs. Mathers started to her feet. She fell to walking behind her husband and tramped in his footsteps as he hurriedly paced the room. The

good woman was on the warpath. She bristled all her bright feathers like a setting hen, at being disturbed, and sputtered:

"Lot of respect I have for you. No woman could have a moment's peace with you. I wish to heaven I had never married you."

Mathers was still beating his way over the thick rug. His wife was close at his heels.

"I wish it myself," gasped the man, as he wiped great beads of perspiration from his brow. "You are enough to try the patience of a saint."

"Then, good Lord, what do I do to you?" gasped Mrs. Mathers. "You are as far from a saint as one of my little goldfish is from the North Pole. Do you understand, you criminal man, I say you are not a saint!"

Still the tramping kept up. Ruth was smiling, even though the color had left her face. She did not know how very much she loved Frank until the subject was talked over again. Many days in close communion with her soul had she secretly whispered that no other man should call her wife. Strange that at this moment, when Mrs. Mathers was striding after the big fellow

who called himself her husband, and who really loved the little spitfire, she, Ruth Ferris, should be taken back to that day when she had seen the spectral scene upon the white road. Never before had she so wanted to see her darling. Somehow she felt that he was living and loved her still. As this thought was borne in upon her mind she, too, arose and walked up and down the room, keeping step with the red-faced husband and the raging wife.

"Ruth," said Mrs. Mathers, dropping into a chair, "what are you doing? Mocking me in my awful domestic trouble?"

"Heaven forbid," answered the girl. "I was making up my mind to take your advice and make a systematic search for Frank Wentworth."

"There, do you hear that, my own love?" sweetly asked the wife of her husband. "The girl herself admits that you are in the wrong. She is going to take my word for it that the man is living and loves her still."

The lawyer sat down, smoothing his pallid face. He had lost the look of turbulence, and

lighted a cigar. His temper was again at its normal condition.

"Then I am willing to help her, my darling," said he. "She has but to command me, and the whole office staff is at her service."

Ruth arose and took the long, white fingers in hers. This man and woman, with their little odd ways of having strife, were the salt of the earth. She loved them both. The sudden resolution to find the missing heir to the will, and at least establish peace in her mind as to his welfare, caused the girl to breathe hard. She did not want to grow hysterical, even before her friends.

"I am going to accept your help, Mr. Mathers," said she, with a new dignity, "and if I find him well, then he may have the money, but if he is ill and needs me——"

Here Ruth broke off and a sudden rush of tears made her turn and flee from the room. After three years the old desires, the old passion surged again in the girlish heart. How much dearer the absent man had constantly grown since the days she first met him in the woodland. Mrs. Mathers looked reprovingly at her husband. He

drew his chair close to hers and placed a large arm about the still beautiful waist. "Sweetheart, I find every woman insipid compared to you. Kiss me, my dear; we may have our quarrels, but you are the girl for me."

Could Ruth have seen these two people, who had spent ten years in blissful, happy life, interspersed with strife and daily bickerings, she would have laughed in spite of the warm tears she was shedding into a small bit of lace.

Going to her dressing-table she took a key from a gold watch chain about her neck. Unlocking a drawer in a box on the table she lifted out a small picture and a faded rose.

She allowed the last rays of the setting sun to drop upon the handsome boyish face. She turned it about and looked on the back.

"To my sweetheart, Ruth, from Frank," was written there.

The girl covered her face with her hands.

"Frank, Frank," whispered she, pressing the pictured face close to her lips. "Where in all the world are you, and am I ever going to see you again?"

CHAPTER III.

At the same time that Ruth had come to New York another girl in different circumstances came also.

Life had not dealt kindly with Hilda Rhodes. Her days since the passing of childhood had been spent in bitter repining for a deed which she had committed. She could remember how many times her mother had warned her that the college boys at Harvard would cause her life-long distress. But girl-like, Hilda would not listen. She went her own independent way until one day she awoke to find herself in the world alone, with a wee babe dependent upon her. The father of her child she loved with all the passionate ardor of young womanhood and the coming of the baby had but strengthened it. She knew that she was the student's wife; that he loved her, and that it was impossible for them to acknowledge to

the world that they were man and wife. The acquaintance had commenced with the school-days of the boy. In his first year in college he had taken the girl into his heart. Soon trouble commenced and Richard Gerson informed Hilda that she must go away from the town, for the stigma of her condition would fall upon him. So she wandered away, leaving but a note of farewell to the distracted mother, saying that some time she would return to their home and confess her sins, but until then would her precious mother never cease to pray for her daughter?

The girl quietly left the city and went to Buffalo, where her child was born in a hospital for women.

Taking the babe during her convalescence she started for New York.

The train which carried her was crowded with passengers, and there was but little room for the transients who bundled themselves among the sleepy carload of people at every station.

Hilda found herself occupying a seat with a girl about her own age. She noted that the face was pale, while the lips had a drawn, pained

expression about them. Hilda mentally conceived an idea of finding out her heart story.

"The night is dark," said she, by way of opening conversation, and peering out of the window. "There seems not to be one star."

The other leaned far over and looked into the heavens. Her dark face gave back no sign to the expression of sympathy which Hilda bestowed upon her.

"I don't care how dark the night is," she answered, harshly. "What does heaven do for such women as we are?"

The two looked into each other's eyes. So black was the piercing glance which fell upon Hilda and her precious bundle that a vivid color reached even to her ear-tips.

She shuddered when she thought of the suffering which the girl must have endured during the past few weeks.

"I do not know that heaven is to blame for our misfortunes," said she, hugging her baby closer to her breast. "You know that every cloud has its silver lining."

The stranger shook her head, slowly.

"This is mine," went on Hilda; "my baby has been a silver lining to my dark cloud."

"So was mine until Heaven chose to take it away from me."

The tones were filled with despair, while the dark eyes again sought the cloudy sky. Hilda noticed that the woman drew aside the blanket that covered her baby and looked intently at the sweet, sleeping face.

"Is it a boy?" asked she, after a spell of silence.

"Yes," answered Hilda, "and he weighed ten pounds when he was born. He is very beautiful, is my baby."

"Where is his father?"

The question, asked with such sarcasm in the tones, at first shocked Hilda. Her baby was legally born, even if it had been secretly. The father was to blame for that.

"His father is still in college," said she, simply.

"So is the father of my dead baby. Mine was a girl."

There was such bitterness in the tones and the sparkling eyes were heavy with tears Hilda could

not refrain from lifting the sleeping child and holding it out toward the stranger.

"Won't you hold my baby, he is so comforting?"

Eagerly, hungrily, the child was snatched to the lonely breast. The shawl revealed the pink cheeks upon which hot kisses were impressed. The child stirred in its sleep, but with a gentle crooning was hushed again into forgetfulness. Hilda said not a word. She did not stop the soft singing hum nor did she ask that her child be laid again in her own arms. Somehow she felt that the girl was being comforted by the weight of the small body, and instinctively her mind went back to that time when she lay sick in the hospital, and all the world looked so dreary and dark. How she had clung to the tiny child who had come into her life so inopportunely!

Now she felt satisfied and thankful that he, her little Dicky, was hers. She had called him Dick because his father had asked her to. She looked the girl over as she rocked back and forth with the sleeping baby. Only once did Hilda bend

over and passionately kiss the little face, murmuring love words into the unheeding ear.

Long days and years after she looked upon that holy caress as the one thing to be treasured and remembered.

Still the crooning continued. Still the child slept and knew nothing. And still Hilda, growing now drowsy, listened to the supplicating, groaning tones of the tearful voice as they came to her through a mist of almost unconsciousness.

Hilda had fallen asleep. Her fair face rested against the crimson cushion of the seat while one white hand had entangled itself in the masses of golden hair which covered the shapely head. The blue eyes were draped with heavy lashes and the sleeper smiled in her sleep as faintly there came to her mind the sound of the humming.

The watcher with eager eyes bent over the tired girl. She touched her arm gently, but no response. The weary muscles, weak from the multitude of duties which had fallen upon the young mother since the coming of her child, gave back no answering throb. The young woman holding

the baby realized this. She had seldom seen such glowing hair, seldom looked into such a beautiful face. Why should she have all and herself nothing?

Again she lifted her hand and touched the white arm, and again received no response.

She lifted the child high in her arms and looked into the tiny face. The same even contour, the little rings of golden hair which curled around the even forehead, spoke a striking likeness to its mother. The babe opened its eyes and took in a deep breath, doubling its little fists with the healthy languor of babyhood. The large eyes blinked once, twice, and then flew wide open. The anxious woman saw that, unlike the mother, the child's eyes were of midnight darkness.

Then the lids closed again and the child slept on. Weary little waif upon the world, who knew not what fate had in store for it!

Hilda only nestled closer into her white arm as she felt the woman move in the seat. The ponderous engine shrieked out its plan to lessen its speed. The long rings of white steam curling away into the dark sky seemed to only

determine the woman upon some plan of action which seemed perfectly feasible and just to her. She watched the little sleeping mother until the car had come to a dead stop and then, lifting the child in her arms, she walked out of the door and stepped into the night. There was not one among the drowsy passengers who had seen the last act of the drama which had been enacted before them, nor had they seen the curtain fall upon the closing act which meant suffering for the golden-haired girl who was resting upon the deep red of the plush under her arm. For almost an hour Hilda slept. She seemed to be, in her weariness, utterly oblivious of the absence of her child.

A sudden lurch of the train and she was awake.

She looked about hastily, with fear-laden eyes. Where were the stranger and the child? Where was her baby, the little golden-haired child of her heart who had become the better part of her life?

Her startled exclamation brought several men to their feet.

"Where is the woman who was with me?" she

demanded of one individual who sat rubbing his eyes with concern at her grief.

"How do I know?" he grumbled. "I've been trying to take care of one woman all my life, and found it the hardest job I ever tackled. Don't want no more, thank you," and he settled back and again closed his eyes as if to sleep.

Hilda walked to the end of the car. She could not believe that the stranger had taken the child and left the train. It was not until she had satisfied herself of the time she had spent in sleep, and that the train had stopped twice during that period, that she made up her mind that her boy had been stolen. After her first outburst of grief she settled her head in the corner and wept behind the little shawl which had adorned her Dicky's head. Several kind-hearted people tried to comfort her, but she saw no peace in the wild schemes which they suggested. The conductor was the first to give her real satisfaction. Had the woman who had stolen the child told her that she was going to New York? Yes? Well, then, the thing was to get off at the next station and board the fast express train for the city and

there face the woman with her cherished treasure.

Hilda took this as the only sensible thing to do, and she left in the night and the shadows swallowed her up.

* * * * * * *

Nearly six years later Hilda Rhodes was on her way to the city again. Fruitless had been the search for the little boy whom she had grown to love in the few short weeks he had been in her life. Every day she prayed that some light be thrown upon the mystery, that she might know if the boy were living and happy; it would be such a comfort to her.

She was still beautiful, ripened into lovely womanhood, to which the charm of girlhood could not compare. Every one admiring the steady-eyed girl knew that her life had a history which would not bear unfolding, else why the beautiful, drooping mouth, or the unfathomable eyes which caused the watcher to turn away with a shudder?

Just at this time our heroine was on her way to New York. As her romance had ended in her

lover going away, so Hilda Rhodes' happiness saw its end in the disappearance of her child.

Her husband, she knew, was dead, for had she not seen his name among the list of passengers upon a fated vessel from which not one had been saved? Many were the tears shed for the man, but the greatest longing was for the little child that she had lost from her clutching fingers so many years ago. Hilda could remember hearing it once said that a mother could forget the existence of the father of her child but not the little babe itself. And how vividly did it flash over her mind as she passed through the beautiful scenery of New York State, that terrible night when she had awakened to find her child gone.

And out of all the suffering she had arisen a beautiful, glorious woman, resplendent in her loveliness as a rose blooming in a garden. Hilda knew not her power. She only knew that life held no charm for her as far as loved ones were concerned. Had she not lost her husband, unloving though he were? And the little child had gone as suddenly as it had come. Had she not gone home to her college town and buried the

dear, white-haired mother who had not for years been so peaceful in expression as she was now in the long, narrow box which would accompany her to her rest?

Hilda was thinking of these things when the train stopped and she noted a man of such great height enter the car that he attracted the attention of every passenger. With a start Hilda inwardly remarked that it was the same station where, six years before, she had gone into the night, starting upon a vain search for her lost child.

The man took a seat directly opposite her, and opening his paper began to read, and Hilda forgot that an exceedingly handsome fellow was seated near her and fell once more into a reminiscent mood. She did not stay there long, however, for turning, she saw a pair of keen grey eyes looking into hers.

She turned uneasily in her seat, dismayed at the eager expression of admiration upon the strong face.

Over and over again her eyes were drawn to his until, with a smile, he offered her a newspaper.

She took it, while a flood of color swept over her face. The magnetic smile made her pulse tingle and involuntarily she moved over in her seat, seemingly inviting him to her side. She did not need to make a second invitation. He dropped into the chair with an exclamation of thankfulness.

"I could not get you to look at me," he said at last, folding up the paper which had been the innocent cause of their acquaintance. "What were you thinking of so earnestly as you looked out of the window? Some sweetheart, I'll wager."

The bantering tone and the winsome smile restored Hilda to her own bright self. But she answered gravely, with a slight pucker playing about the red lips, that she had been thinking of the past.

"It's a bad thing to do," began the stranger; "I think it well for every man and woman to bury their past, especially if it is disagreeable. Now, for my part, I do not regret anything I have ever done, and don't intend to, either."

Hilda noted the broad forehead ending at the almost shaggy eyebrows, the straight look of

truthfulness which shone from the grey eyes, and lastly, the kindly, smiling mouth, with the full, red, passionate lips. She said to herself that such a man could not do a mean thing in the world, no matter how hard he might try, for his nature would not allow it.

They took up the commonplace things of the day. Hilda chattered on about her hopes and ambitions. She was going to New York to get work, to see what kind of a future she could make for herself.

"I live in New York in winter," replied the man, "and maybe there will be many times you will want a friend. If so, there is my card, and I want you to send me your address as soon as you are located and I may have some news for you."

Hilda noticed that he was examining her hand. Only one small ring sparkled upon her finger. In a little box at the bottom of her trunk there rested the small wedding ring, the little band of gold that bound her to the Harvard College student and made it possible for her to kiss the lost child's lips when it had been born with thankfulness.

Through the long journey toward the great metropolis the grey eyes ever studied the blue. The handsome dark head rested against the crimson of the cushion in close proximity to the golden.

The woman and man were both sorry that the end of their journey had arrived. Hilda gathered up her bundles while the strong fingers of the man grasped her dress-suit case.

She followed him out with a sense of security and they parted at the ferry, his way lying in a different direction from hers.

On her trip across the North River she took out the card and read:

"Thomas G. Brittle, 48 Wall Street."

For several moments she studied the card and then, with a feeling of satisfaction, stored it away in her little handbag.

This will be remembered as the day that Ruth Ferris was being admitted into the family of the Mathers.

Hilda Rhodes, as she called herself still, for

the girl had never given herself the luxury of passing under her husband's name, found a small room where she could live within her means and be happy. The sound of so much life inspired her with the hope that in all the great city there must be a place for her, and she would find it if it pleased Heaven to aid her.

The days passed into weeks and almost a month, and still Hilda was holding the wolf from her door by close economy. Not one penny would she spend until the time came that she had honestly earned money enough to live upon.

One afternoon as the winter wind was blowing up Broadway, and the river was filled with tooting ferryboats, Hilda was sitting quietly in her room. She was thankful for the warm little spot she called home, where even the landlady smiled into her face and bade her a good-morning or a good-night as the case might be. Hilda noticed that every one was so very good to her always.

A knock at the door brought her to her feet. A card was handed in upon which was written the name "Thomas Brittle."

Hilda hurriedly made her toilet, brushing back

the straying golden curls, which were one of her chief charms.

A broad back was turned toward her as she entered the parlor. The man was looking thoughtfully out of the window. How well Hilda remembered the big, dark head, and it was with a little thrill that she glided across the room and touched him upon the arm.

"It was so kind of you to come," said she. "I wondered if you had received my note."

The visitor whirled about and took the white hands in his. Hilda thought he was going to crush them in his great grasp, but somehow she liked the strength that seemed to be sparkling from his large body.

"Indeed, little woman," said he, looking deep into her eyes with a gleam of grey which Hilda never would forget, "I came because I could not help it; you simply drew me to you."

Hilda gave a happy laugh. She urged him to be seated, but he declined, and with bowed head and reverent manner he told her that he loved her, and that he had come expressly to ask her to be his wife.

The girl was so startled that for a long time she clasped and unclasped her fingers. Here was the place in the big city for her—the wife of a man for whom she could work and who would love her in return.

Hilda had forgotten the dead mother, the drowned husband, and, for the first time in years, the little lost child faded from her memory. She lived in a beautiful present, filled with love and happiness. The big man lifted the rosy face to his and read the answer in the tear-dimmed, blue eyes which sent the blood in great leaps through his heart.

CHAPTER IV.

ONLY the roaring of the wind amid the rattling of the cars and carriages could be heard by the man and woman as they sat in the small parlor of the boarding-house. They were drinking in the honey sweet which comes to every loving heart when the fountain is first opened.

"I have told you nothing about myself," presently spoke up the man, and it was this speech that brought back to the mind of the woman the time upon the train when she had awakened to find the little child gone into the shadows of the night.

She suddenly dropped the hands which had so tightly held hers and she had pressed in return.

"And I have told you nothing of myself," reiterated she, with a struggle to stand upon her feet.

"Don't leave me," entreated the rich voice.

"You can tell it here, and if there is much, remember, my heart is large and I can forgive much in one I love."

Without a warning the floodgate of tears was swept away and Hilda bowed her golden head on the big warm hands and wept. Wept for the man lost at sea, for the dead mother in the cemetery at Cypress Hills, and lastly, with great sobs, for the tiny babe that had rested for so few weeks upon her breast. This she would have to tell. Of course, he would want to know. She listened quietly as he told her of his family. How for years he had lived with an old mother and had been satisfied that it should be so. But no more could he look upon life in the same old easy manner. He wanted a wife, and she must be Hilda. Not since that trip down the State had he been able to get the golden glint of her hair or the gleam of the blue eyes from his mind.

"I have told you all," said he. "I come with clean hands into your life and offer you all that I have."

Hilda wished, with a sickening heart, that she

had the same kind of a story to tell, and she tremblingly began.

Back at the beginning, when she was but sixteen, how she had met the student who had won the love of the young girlhood. All about the secret marriage and the sudden leaving of her home.

"And there was a—a——"

Here the man hesitated.

Hilda saw a look of pain sweep into his eyes, but he only tightened the clasp upon the white hands.

"Yes, a little child," she said, simply, with a very white face.

"And it is dead?"

"I do not know." Hilda's answer brought no further question, and the girl tremblingly told the story of the night ride and the loss of the baby.

"Then you do not know whether it is living or not?"

How tender were the tones of the man as he said this! And again Hilda was weeping wildly,

while the wind kept up its mournful dirge upon the outside.

"Would to Heaven I knew," cried she. "I have searched for a golden-haired boy for years, and I know not where to look. I fear I shall never hear of my little baby again."

The cry of the mother for her child filled Brittle's eyes with tears. The only gruesome regret in it all was that he had not known her years before and he instead of that dead student, now lying under the water, had been the father of her child. The blood tingled through his veins at the thought. She was so beautiful, and the helpless cry for her lost one made the heartache worse. How much dearer she had grown since the painful recital!

There was no dishonor upon the dear, bright head. He would lift her magnanimously out of her life of poverty and draw the little fragile, golden-haired flower into the garden of his heart to bloom for him alone. He felt that the expression which had first drawn him toward her had been sent there through the loss of the

child—a heart-hungry look that leapt into life every time she raised her eyes to his face.

Brittle thanked God that he had found her as uncontaminated by the world's contact as she was.

He would take her to the dear old mother, and the past of Hilda Rhodes would be lost in the future of Hilda Brittle.

* * * * * * *

Tom Brittle, as those who knew him intimately called him, felt that the whole universe had been made for him, that his life so far had not been lived in vain, for did he not possess the merriest-hearted little wife in all the world? And how the yellow-headed sprite made the home-rooms ring with laughter! Even his mother, with her puritanical notions, could but smile at the brilliancy of her son's wife or listen with avidity to the stories which rippled from her lips as brook water ripples in its bed toward the sea.

Tom Brittle lived up the State upon a magnificent farm during the summer, but the winter months found him in New York among congenial companions.

His lawyer, Mr. Mathers, of the firm of Mathers and Company, proved of great service to the rich man when in the city.

One afternoon he was speaking of his wife in the presence of the lawyer. Mathers turned and looked at him.

"I didn't know that you had a wife, Tom."

"Indeed I have, and the sweetest woman in the world."

"With the exception of mine," grunted the lawyer under his breath, as he thought of the woman who had made his Heaven and placed him in equally low depths of perdition. But Mathers had long ago grown to believe that the paradise he enjoyed when he and his wife were happy overshadowed the pangs of misery which every day of his life he felt when in the dear woman's company.

"Why don't you bring your treasure some day to dine with us? I can show a woman surpassed by none in New York."

Lawyer Mathers drew himself up proudly as he said this.

Brittle wondered if the other's wife had the

same depth to her eyes and golden gleam to her hair, and with a profuse color still wondered if Mathers' wife evinced half the emotion and passion for him that Hilda had for her husband. Was a husband ever so fortunate in the world as he? A wife untaught by the awfulness of the world's sin, and yet softened and mellowed by womanly suffering.

"Any time you like, old fellow," said he, as he parted from Mr. Mathers. "Ask your wife to name the day and we will come, and prepare yourself to meet the most beautiful woman in the world—to me."

Both men laughed happily as he put the finishing touch to his assurance, for each in his heart knew that the woman who reigned there queen was the most beautiful woman in the world—to him.

So it happened that in a few days Ruth and Mrs. Mathers were waiting with eagerness to meet the millionaire's wife, who, according to her husband's view, was the loveliest woman in all the world.

Ruth had begun her search for the miss-

ing man. It had only been a short time since Mathers had consented to take up the case. Her thoughts were full of plans to locate Frank, when the door opened and Mrs. Mathers slipped in arrayed in all the glory of her very best. "There," said she, plumping herself down upon the divan, "I think Bella has done her prettiest with this gown. Now, would you not think it brand new? I tell you, there is nothing like a French maid—they save their salary in refurbishing."

Ruth praised the beautiful form, giving full justice to the maid's handiwork.

"I am simply dying with curiosity to see that woman coming here to-night. Hubby says her husband is one of his wealthiest clients. I am going to be extra nice to him."

"And probably make the golden-haired wife jealous," cautioned Ruth.

"No danger of that," answered Mrs. Mathers, "for hubby says that he is hers heart and soul."

The two women walked downstairs together and were soon being presented to a strikingly handsome man, upon whose arm a golden-haired woman was leaning.

Mr. Mathers introduced his wife and Ruth. Both members of the household wondered not at the pride of the rich man over the wife he had so praised.

The dinner was spent in pretty pleasantries from the gentlemen to the ladies, each one trying to outdo the other in the compliments which are a part of woman's nature to love.

Ruth, after the repast was finished, took the wife of Thomas Brittle to her room and with girlish glee the maiden listened to the wife's story of happiness.

This dinner party established a friendship between Ruth and Hilda which would endure many things. Especially were the two drawn together when they learned that the same town had given them birth, and that in the same cemetery their mothers and fathers were resting. Scarcely a day but that the two did not see each other. One day while Ruth was visiting her friend, and the springtime was following close upon the winter, the two women were in Mrs. Brittle's drawing-room. The weather had not so changed but that a fire was needed and each woman was glad of

the warmth from the grate-fire. Only the night before Hilda had talked over the matter with her husband of her little lost boy, who would now be nearly seven were he living. Brittle had exhausted all the detective service in the city trying to locate the child, and the little mother felt that her immense wealth was of no consequence if her baby boy could not be found. But Hilda Brittle had never been so happy in her life before as since she had lived with her noble husband, but there was ever gnawing at her heart the love of the little lost child.

So, now, while she and Ruth were talking so confidentially with one another, she made up her mind to tell her the story. Together they wept over the missing boy, and Ruth hoped that he would be found.

There came into the girl's mind a faint remembrance of the name Gerson as Hilda spoke of the father of her child. Strange as it may seem, into Ruth's mind came the thought of a crouching man upon a wet road, and her own fear as she saw her dear one amid the falling rain. But Ruth did not know or remember that Gerson had

been Frank's room-mate in those long-ago college days.

So through the bright summer Ruth went to the home of the Brittles to spend the warm months, and it was while there that she received a summons home as a trace of the man Wentworth had been found, and if she thought wise she might come to the city.

* * * * * * *

On lower Broadway there stands a building filled with struggling lawyers. In every room were signs of poverty, with but a chair or two and an official-looking rack where the papers were filed that might happen to come into the firm's hands.

Facing the river were two rooms known as the offices of Gerson and Company. The same conspicuous need of furniture was apparent as had been noticed in the other rooms.

Two young men, in the waning of the afternoon, were seated together busy over a legal-looking document, and both were silent.

One was in the best of health, with startling red cheeks and glowing black eyes. The other,

taller and of better physique, but the glow of health had faded from his face.

"It seems almost impossible, Dick," said he, leaning back languidly in his chair, "to get the idea out of my mind that I ought to hear from my guardian; he cannot have wholly deserted me."

"Get that idea out of your head, Frank," suggested the other. "When one's people neglects them for years one can safely say good-bye to any hopes ever having dwelt in the breast. The trouble with you is that you pass your days in that miserable house, where the air is as foul as a prison and the food worse. Talk about economy, I would not for the sake of New York be in your position. The old hag you live with is enough to give one the 'hypo.' I hate her."

With a puff upon his cigarette he strode up and down the room.

The other made no response to the words.

"You are on the verge of the grave, Frank," said the young lawyer, "and unless you turn around about face you will find yourself in the middle of six feet of earth. It doesn't pay."

Frank Wentworth leaned his head upon his arm. A pained expression followed the flippant words of his companion.

"But what are you going to do when money comes in like the drops of dew and with no more certainty? Old Mag, I grant you, is a tramp, and her husband is worse, but the girl, the child there, Dick, is a treasure. One cannot help loving her."

"I saw her flying with unkempt hair and dirty face in front of a driving automobile the other day, and a nastier child I have never seen." There was seeming disgust in the voice of the speaker as he took a third turn about the room.

"True, she is dirty," answered the sickly-looking man; "true, as you say, but she is not to blame. What do you expect from a woman who is drinking half the time? I only stay there on account of the child."

"Well, you are more of a philanthropist than I," was the reply. "I could not for any living being sacrifice my health and happiness as you are doing."

There was complete silence for a time save for the frantic puffing of a half-lighted cigarette and

the squeaking of the rolling chair as the lawyer turned back and forth nervously in it.

"It is my private opinion," went on Gerson, "that you are worrying over that girl who jilted you at college. Why under the sun do you allow an old dead matter to infuse your life with misery and turn your hair like this?" and Gerson lifted a half-grey lock from the broad brow.

"I shall never outlive my love for Ruth Ferris, and anyway," here the voice grew tender with emotion, "anyway, Dick, old fellow, I'm not for long. I would die with her name upon my lips."

"Fudge and twice fudge!" stormed the other, biting his lips furiously. "You make me tired with your sentimentality. Why do you not, for love of Heaven, take another tack and be a man? Go away for a week or so, and you will be new when you return."

"I cannot, Dick," was the reply, "for I have much to do before the end comes."

If the exhausted man had known what the end meant, and all the awful trials which would come to him before the end did come, he would not have complacently gathered his pencils into his pocket

and take his hat from the nail with almost a look of resignation upon the worn face. The end meant to him, after the work was finished, only a weary laying down of life and its stern duties—this was all.

He walked across Broadway until he reached the Bowery, and turning into the dirty, noisy street he passed on and on, till growing more tired, his steps lagged by the way.

Farther down the street he could hear the grinding of an organ and see the inevitable monkey running about on his string.

As he directed his footsteps toward a shanty which stood back in a lot a child about the age of seven, with straggling golden curls, sped down the alley and ran up toward him. Her skirts were ragged and torn completely across, the bare feet were red from the hot bricks. The dark eyes were filled with fire, a mouth full of pearl-white teeth shone through the well-shaped red lips.

"Ah, Midge," said the man, "you have come to meet me, have you? Well, I'm glad, for I don't feel very well to-day. Can you not see it?" From the dark eyes of the child the tears welled over

and she smacked them away with her fingers, dirty and sticky from molasses.

"I don't want not'in' to happen to youse, Mr. Frank," sobbed she, wriggling along sidewise and trying to hide her emotion. "I hain't got no friend but youse, sir."

"We will have hopes then, dear little Midge, that I shall remain with you always, for if ever a child needed a friend you do."

The child hung her head. She wanted to follow the man to his room, which was in the garret of the house. But something in the tired eyes forbade her from doing so.

"I wanted to tell you something, sir," said she, trembling faintly, "and then you will let Midge come to youse room; tell me, will youse?"

Frank Wentworth grasped the hand of the child, leading her up the stairs. "You may tell me now, my dear, and please God it will do you some good. Have you heard anything about your own people?"

"No, sir, 'tain't that," whispered the little one; 'tain't that, sir, but if I tells youse, don't let Wild Mag know that I told you, will youse?"

The sacred promise was given, but before the story was begun, Frank washed the beautiful, childish face and soaped well the hands, which would have done credit to a millionaire's daughter.

"Now we will listen to the story," said Frank, but the child had evidently forgotten what she had come to tell, for, spying a locket upon the chain hidden next to the heart of the sick man, she made a request that she might see it.

Frank, who could deny the child nothing, took the picture from the little locket and placed it between the child's fingers.

"Oh, ain't she beautiful," said Midge; "but gee, Mr. Frank, any feller who could get her would be a jim-dandy. Be she youse goil?"

Frank laughed at the tone of inquiry and the question.

Ah, dear Heaven, how much he wished that the dear face was that of his "goil." Once he had thought she was to be his, but the old dreams were past and Ruth was but a myth in his life. Had he not gotten a letter from her aunt, saying that the girl was to be married, and for him not

to ruin her prospects by placing himself in her way? And this cold, cruel letter had blasted his life and made him look differently upon the world. The child was still gazing at the picture.

Frank looked into the pretty face and then at the child. He placed the locket again upon the chain, closing the cover with a snap.

"We have forgotten, Midge," said he, almost severely, "that we came here to talk about something you had to tell me. I am listening."

CHAPTER V.

"THE story, if you please, or question, whichever you call it."

Frank Wentworth repeated this with emphasis. He could not afford to let the child see that he loved an imaginary girl who had long ago forgotten him.

Midge looked thoughtfully into his face. She pulled the dirty dress closer about her black legs.

"Does youse love dat pretty lady?" said she, demanding the information as if it were her right to know. "For if youse does, and youse can't have her, den I knows what it is dat makes youse sick."

But Frank did not answer. He gravely took the childish face in his hands, repeating that he must know just what it was that Midge had wanted of him.

"Oh, what I were a-going to say," and the child

bobbed up and down, her little face flaming red, "is dat ole Wild Mag had been a-lying ter me and ter youse and ter everybody. I ain't no goil, and I ain't never been, does youse understan'? I'se a boy, and dese togs don't long a-dangling 'bout my legs."

The child slipped down and gathered the rags up firmly in its hands and drew them tightly up between its sturdy little legs.

"I will be more like dis, when I get trousers likes I ought to have. Wild Mag says I sha'n't have them, but I says I will, or I'se don't sell no more papers. She says dat folks don't give to a boy like a goil, but I won't be a goil no more. Would you, Mr. Frank?"

"Well, I should say not, my boy; so you are not Midge, that is, you can't go by a girl's name. Who does Mrs. Maglone say you are?"

"Oh, she never tells me anything 'bout that, but the minute I found out her lie I told her dat I must have breeches, and she guv me dis."

Hastily pulling up his dress the now boy, who had for the whole of his short life supposed he was a girl, showed the blue stripes, several of

them, until it made Frank's blood run cold to think of the childish pain.

"It is a shame," expostulated he, squeezing the little form closer to him. "I am so sorry, little boy."

It seemed to bring the child nearer to him—the news he had just been told. The sweet face he had ever loved, but the question was, whose child was he?

Frank soothed the childish mind by telling the boy that he would speak to the woman with whom they both lived, making her understand that she must allow the boy to assert his sex in the shape of a new pair of trousers.

For a little while the two talked, and Frank sought the woman who had kept him from the street for many months.

Maggy Maglone had not always been the fallen creature she was now, but evil associations and drink had degenerated her into a fiend. She lived upon the money which the little golden-haired child received from charitable strangers.

For years past, in fact, since the boy could walk, the entire family had been supported with

the few pennies which he brought to the old woman. Still, Bill Maglone had under his house a room where counterfeit money was made. This the members of the gang passed and were in constant danger of being detected. Several times Maglone had been arrested for drunkenness, but the worst of his crimes were not known to the police. The wife protected her husband, and with Irish wit the two had escaped the penitentiary.

Frank Wentworth, with a determined face and the child by the hand, entered the little room where remnants of bread and molasses were still upon the table.

"Mrs. Maglone," he said, severely, "the child has told me a story which I want you to verify or to deny. Is it a boy or a girl?" and Frank Wentworth held out his hand to the child and shoved the little body toward the old hag.

"And who says she ain't little Midge, the child of my heart?" sniveled the artful woman. "Who says that I ain't cared for her all these years? Who did you say said it?"

The vile face was poked close to that of the

man and the long, skinny arms drew into them the child, who started away and rolled its eyes up at Frank, gesticulating dissatisfaction with the termination. He understood and went on.

"I shall make an investigation as to this child's people. You should not send him out for beer into the dives. He is a boy all right."

"Yes, and I am going to wear trousers," howled the youngster. "I don't want dese kind of duds any longer."

The woman saw it was of no use to evade the subject.

"And ain't youse worn them all the time since youse was born, I'd like to know? The fine folks like the girl better than the boy."

"That was your reason, then, of putting this vile rag upon the child?" asked Wentworth. "Take it off and give him trousers, immediately."

The command cowed the woman almost into obedience. Her boarder had such a tone of authority when he spoke that she did not dare to openly disobey him.

But she cried out her displeasure at being balked in her plans for future maintenance, urg-

ing upon the child the necessity of appearing before the fine Broadway people as a little girl.

"Look at dem curls, now, Mr. Wentworth," wheedled she; "don't you think dat dat face is too sweet for a boy? God Almighty made a mistake and I have only tried a little to mend it."

But no amount of persuasion could make the friend of the child change his mind; he would have the boy in trousers if he had to purchase them himself.

* * * * * * *

Frank Wentworth went back to his own room. It was there he wrote the letter to his uncle's lawyer asking for aid. It was to be his last appeal. Taking the letter in his hand he walked to the box and mailed it. The small white envelope created a stir in the office of Mathers and Company. Immediately a message was sent to Ruth, who came into the city with Hilda, for the rich man's wife was anxious to see her friend happy.

They arrived in the morning and Mathers met them with the family carriage.

"And you have heard?" asked Ruth breathlessly; "do tell me."

Mr. Mathers settled back into the luxurious cushions, and it seemed to Ruth that he would never speak.

"At last we have heard," was all he said.

Ruth was contented a moment, for she felt that soon she would know just what had happened.

Mrs. Mathers drew the girl to her arms, telling her to hope.

Then the exact condition of the will was gone over. Ruth was told that her lover was sick and poverty-stricken, ill at the home of his landlady.

A great feeling of joy welled into the girl's heart as she heard these words. Then he would be hers again!

"It is for this reason that I have not heard from him," said she, after a time of silence.

"It is my idea," began Mrs. Mathers, "that the young fellow was too proud to seek you when his whole life has been a failure. Now affairs are changed."

"Not so changed after all, my love," drawled Mr. Mathers, with a twinkle in his eyes which

brought forth a look of concern from Ruth. She did not believe it possible for these two to go one day and not bicker over the most trivial things. The remark from the lawyer caused his wife to spring to her feet.

"All you know about young hearts," said she. "You have been old and tough for years. You miserable fellow!"

"Oh, aunty!" cautioned Ruth, lovingly—she had grown to use this endearing title to the woman—"you will be sorry if you talk to uncle that way."

"Now, no, I won't, Ruth, for he is too exasperating for anything. Don't try to make me speak to him again, for it will be no use."

Mr. Mathers had on a broad grin. Ruth wanted to proceed with the discussion, her anxiety being great for plans to meet Frank.

"Your aunt has taken leave of her senses," said the lawyer, giving Ruth an affectionate smile. "She is a lady who would soon put her husband in a padded cell."

"I wish I could put you in your grave, you

ranter," sobbed the wife. "You place me in such positions that I hardly know which way to turn."

"Then, if you are willing, I will take leave of you, and you shall not be bothered with me again."

Mrs. Mathers stopped in her parade up and down the room; she looked keenly through her tears into her husband's face. There seemed to her to be a look of determination upon it. Was he really going to do something rash because she had spoken crossly to him? But did he not commence it?

The man saw he had the advantage and commenced:

"I am constantly making you feel badly, my dear, and now you have wished me dead. I shall comply with your wishes."

Saying this he placed his hand in his hip pocket as if to take something from it.

"Sweetheart, you shall not!" screamed the lady. "You are my darling husband and I cannot live without you."

They were in each other's arms almost imme-

diately, rocking back and forth in the ecstasy of their reconciliation.

Ruth gave a broad smile into the lawyer's face, thankful that the quarrel came to such a timely climax.

"We will now proceed to business, and see if there is some way open to arrange for a meeting with the august young heir."

Ruth listened with delight as the lawyer said he would go the next night to the address upon the letter.

So accordingly, the next day Frank Wentworth received a note from the law firm, saying that Mr. Mathers would call upon him in person and make such arrangements as were necessary for his care, according to the terms of the will. But they were careful not to mention the girl's name in the missive.

But fate seemed against the sick young man. He was too ill to care. Gerson opened and read the letter.

"I'll bet it's come at last," muttered he, as he sat by the bed and listened to the moanings of

the sick man. "I'll bet he has a fortune coming to him."

But he could not arouse the slumbering man, and laid the letter upon the table.

All through the day and into the following one he sat by his college chum, Midge coming in once in a while like a pale sprite, doing errands and appearing much concerned over the severe turn Frank's illness had taken.

The child wondered what would become of him if unkindly death should take from him his only friend, for there was no mistaking the feeling the man had had for the child as long as his senses remained. Once Midge heard him murmur the name of "Ruth," and the child's mind went back to the day when he had been shown the picture in the locket. How well he remembered the look of pain that spread across the man's face as he had covered the pictured face and placed the little gold bauble in his pocket.

And now he was lying dying, so the doctor said. This meant that Midge would be without a friend in the world.

He sat with his little fists digging his eyes,

keeping back by mere manly force the tears which oozed through his lids. He got up and went into the street. He walked along, kicking out his legs now free from the obnoxious skirts. He wandered through the Bowery and turned the corner toward Broadway. Suddenly he came close to a magnificent carriage. In it were two ladies, while from the side a gentleman was hurrying away.

"What a singularly pretty child!" Midge heard one sweet voice say. "His hair is like spun gold."

"But awfully dirty," another voice uttered. He looked down at his soiled, bare legs and tried to wipe off some of the dust from his trousers.

But he was not destined to pass on.

"Come here, child," the first speaker called; "I want to speak to you."

It was Hilda Brittle who spoke, and shyly the child edged his way toward the carriage. Ruth was waiting, with catching breath, for more than a slum child. Was not Frank at the end of that horrible, dirty street, and was he not ill? She narrowed her eyes into a dreamy expression and watched Hilda as with delicate white gloves she drew the boy toward her.

"You are a dear little creature," said the beautiful woman. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Midge," was the reply.

"But that is a girl's name," answered Hilda, "and you are every bit a boy. She eyed the straight legs and small, dirty hands. Somehow her thoughts went back into the past to a certain black-eyed darling who had so suddenly left her. Now two pleading dark eyes, surrounded with golden curls, were gazing into her own.

"I were a goil until lately," the child answered simply enough. "I didn't know I were a boy till a few days ago."

Hilda clutched the child's hands closer. It soothed the constant pain at her bleeding heart. It was for little Dicky's sake that she pressed the hands of the waif.

"And where do you live, my child?" asked she, loath to allow him to go away. "Are you one of the children of the Bowery?"

The child's eyes widened and then drooped. At last, "I'm only a little child of der slums," said he.

The answer brought the tears into Hilda's eyes.

Even Ruth sat up and drew her handkerchief from her handbag.

"And haven't you a mother?" more tenderly asked Hilda.

"Not as I kin remember," whispered the boy. "I just guess I blowed into der earth 'out no pa and ma."

"Then where do you live?" asked Ruth, now thoroughly interested. "You must have a home."

"I roosts down here at Old Wild Mag's, but she don't like nothin' 'bout me but der chink I brings her."

Hilda opened her pocketbook and took out fifty cents. She placed it between the childish, dirty fingers, which clutched it over as if it had been a gem of purest water. Ruth remarked afterward that probably that money would soften the child's blows that night.

"Where does youse live?" asked the child, quickly; "does youse live 'bout here?"

"No," replied the sweetest voice Midge had ever heard. "I live at the Plaza Hotel. Would you like to come and see me some time?"

Ruth put her hand upon Hilda's arm.

"Don't go too far, dear," cautioned she; "you can never tell what trouble such people will make you."

"I wouldn't hurt the pretty lady, ma'am," replied Midge in a low tone, fixing his large eyes upon Ruth's face, and straightway that young lady felt ashamed of herself and subsided into the cushions of the carriage, listening while Hilda planned that the little child of the slums should call upon her at her room in two days from that time.

"Dey might not let me in dere," said Midge, anxious for fear when he should arrive at the hotel the brass-buttoned men should turn him away.

"I'll leave word for you to be admitted," replied the lady, smiling.

Midge felt that he was going to cry, just why he could not tell, but there was something in the dear tones that stirred his wicked little heart to its very depths.

Suddenly there came into the dark depths of the fast-filling eyes an expression which struck terror to Hilda's eyes.

"I believe they are his eyes," she murmured to herself. "If I could get that one little child from my mind it seems as if I should go mad."

But neither Ruth nor the wondering child heard the murmur, and Midge felt the white-gloved hand press his convulsively as she kissed the dirty little face good-bye.

"Dat's the sweetest lady in all der world," muttered the child, "but de odder, who was afraid I'd hurt the pretty one, looks like der face in Mr. Frank's locket."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. MATHERS passed down the Bowery, looking at the numbers as he walked. Often he looked at a slip of paper which he carried in his hand. He was soon from the sight of the ladies, hurrying past the stuffy stores, and halted in front of the number upon the paper.

Upstairs Gerson had succeeded in arousing the sick man.

"Is it you, Dick?" the pale lips muttered.

"Sure, old fellow, you are weak and tired for the want of proper food and care. I'm going to insist upon your leaving here." Again the troubled eyes slumbered, but almost immediately opened again.

"If I could only see Ruth once," murmured he. "Only once before I go away."

"You are not going to die," roughly replied

Gerson; "cheer up, I know you are pretty sick, but there is always hope."

"I loved her so, Dick, and to think she would marry when she was my promised wife!"

"They'll all do it, unless one is unlucky to get her first. For my part, I think you are a lucky man."

But Gerson remembered the feeling of jealousy that came into his heart on that long-ago day when a fairy form glided into the wood and a passionate voice sang out the message of the rosary. But he only flippantly remarked that he had no faith in women, and never would have.

"But you did not know Ruth," whispered Frank, "she was different from most girls."

The tired head sank wearily upon the pillow, the white lips were drawn with pain.

"But she was not unlike them all enough to keep her promise to you, and I would forget her."

"That is not possible," said the faint voice, "no more can the day forget the sun."

Then again he seemed to gather strength, and raised upon his arm.

"You were going to marry Hilda Rhodes at one time," said he.

"Was I? Well, I didn't, and mighty glad I am of it. A whining woman is not to my liking."

Gerson was fingering the letter which was yet unshown to its owner. Should he give it to Frank or not?

Suddenly over the sick face came a ghastly change. Gerson sprang to the bedside. He could see the white death-damp settling over the strong face. Once did the dark eyes fly open, and then droop in sheer exhaustion.

A step upon the stairs and the doctor's face protruded itself into the doorway.

"Is he better?" asked he, walking toward the bed. "Ah, no. He will not need anything more in this world. He is breathing his last." The man of medicine said this as he took his hat and passed out. He could not spare time with the dead—his duty lay with the living. Gerson stood and looked down into the still, white face. He had often been taken for Frank's brother. The doctor had even asked him if they were relations.

Had the man not asked him what the dead

man's name was? And he had told him it was Richard Gerson, and Bill Maglone, hearing the answer, rolled a quid of tobacco into his cheek and protruded a very red tongue and put the fact down that the living man was trying to pass himself off for the dead one, for future reference. Bill had shown the doctor out, leaving the dead and the living in close proximity to each other.

"My God!" gasped Gerson, as he realized what he had done. "Is it possible that I have given the wrong name. Of course, I want to be Frank Wentworth, and who would not, with these prospects?" Just as he was cogitating upon the matter the door again opened and a man of about forty, tall, handsome and distinguished-looking, entered the room.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Frank Wentworth?" said he, and Richard Gerson, looking at the dead face, wondered if he could harm the quiet figure any, and answered, "Yes."

"Then allow me to shake hands with you," said Mr. Mathers, jovially, "for it is my pleasure to bring you the good news of a fortune. You have

been left heir to considerable money, conditionally, if you will marry a certain lady."

Gerson, in his fear that the man might note the silent figure upon the bed, led him, talking, from the room. In that little bare chamber where the rightful heir had lived so long, lay all that was left of poor Frank Wentworth. No wonder when Mr. Mathers came back to the carriage alone with the story that he had found the young man that Ruth said:

"He must be the one, uncle. There can be no mistake, think you?"

"Mistake nothing," said that gentleman. "He showed me certain papers which makes me know that he is the right man, and the young fellow you loved in those long-ago college days will be with you to-night."

Ruth, with Hilda holding her hand, cried silently behind her veil. The shock had been so great and she so hoped that it was her lover in that little hovel in the Bowery.

* * * * * * *

After the man had departed Gerson, or the new Frank Wentworth as he will now have to be

called in his new position, went back to his dead friend. The same white, set look, deepened into a grey pallor, had settled over the face. The bloodless lips were compressed together, and Gerson took the long, white fingers and locked them together.

"How warm he is yet," muttered he. "I wonder if there is such a thing as that he is living. I will make sure of it."

Dipping a cloth into cold water he folded it over the white face, and with a deadly fear tugging at his heart he gathered up the papers necessary to identify himself and walked out into the open air.

Midge in the meantime came scurrying back. His little feet were keeping time to a tune played by an old organ grinder. Even while Midge's heart hurt him he could dance. From the time he was a creeping baby and had learned to climb up by the neighbors' children he had kept time to the straggling musicians who infested that part of the Bowery. Now he was on his way home still with his toes tingling for a dance. Somehow the blood flew into his face

when he thought of his dying friend. There was nothing to do but to watch him go, for the sick man would not eat any of the dogs, or weiner-wursts, as they were rightfully called, which the child would bring.

He reached his home and entered the door. Mag and Bill were talking softly in the corner. The man was gesticulating wildly with his hands. They paid little heed to the boy, and he noted them not, save with a glance of hatred, the feeling being born in his young heart from the cruel way they had treated the sick man upstairs.

He crept up the attic steps one after another. He did not know but that the handsome friend of Frank, whom he had never liked, might be there and tell him that his room was preferable to his company.

But there was such a solemn silence about the place that Midge tiptoed over to the cot.

He saw the white cover over the curly head and grasped the cloth and pulled it off.

He did not understand the doctor had said that the man was dead, nor would he believe his eyes.

He knelt down beside the cot and chafed the now unlocked fingers.

A spasm of pain shot across the face and Frank Wentworth slowly opened his eyes.

"Am I dead, and who are you?" whispered he, with great difficulty.

"It is Midge," said a little voice, softly, and the child turned the faint light of the candle upon the white face.

"Have I been asleep long?" asked Frank, as Midge worked about him with tender hands.

There was something in the kiss left upon the little face by the beautiful lady that made the child softer of heart. He looked upon the sweet caresses as an idolizing audience would upon the last benediction of a beloved pastor. Frank Wentworth, Midge knew, was very ill, but not dead. The child realized that while there was life there was hope. He sent again after the doctor, who came in a hurry.

That gentleman did not care to know the name of his patient. That had passed from his mind. There were other things of more importance. So he gathered together all the strength of the sick

man and gave him the desired medicine, leaving word that he would call in the morning.

* * * * *

Ruth listened to the story of finding Wentworth and with beating heart waited for him to appear that evening. Mathers had told the young man that he would be expected to dine with them, not telling him of the former romance he had once had or supposed to have had with the young heiress.

Hilda was almost as anxious as her friend. She loved the pretty girl with a sisterly affection. She, too, donned her beautiful white dress, looking more like a golden-haired angel than a woman, and Ruth told her so. Mrs. Mathers watched the two girls arm in arm come down the long steps.

"I declare," said she to the lawyer, who was sitting in a large easy chair, "I never saw two such handsome girls. They are enough to make a stir anywhere."

"Not so lovely as you, my love," cooed the big man. "I would not change my ducky for two like them—that is two apiece."

"You old Mormon," laughed the wife; "I should hope not."

"We are ready, you see," said Hilda, shaking hands with Mr. Mathers, "to meet the most capable young man of the age."

Ruth blushed, and then the doorbell rang.

The room in which Ruth met the man who would afterward figure in her life much is worth describing. Mrs. Mathers was a lover of browns and reds. In the broad light of the sun she admired the soft brown, while after the lighting of the gas, a deep red must suffuse the room. Hence, she had the decorations made to suit the time.

The morning room, where each took a breakfast to his fancy, was draped in heavy light-brown plush in winter while in summer a gorgeous patterned linen hung in the place of the heavier drapery.

Ruth loved the dark room in the evening, and she wondered how it had been possible for any one person to plan such an elaborate home. To-night she stood under the brilliant chandelier, her dark hair coiled in great masses upon the small, proud head. Into the dark eyes had crept

an expression of smothered passion, such as is felt only by women. Her petite form, no larger than in those olden days when she ran with lightning footsteps to the wood to meet her lover, was covered with a lacy drapery which no man could have found a name for had he hunted the fashion magazines for a year. Mr. Mathers made a mental note of the effect of the dark-red rose clinging near the temple. Then his eyes wandered from the dark little beauty to the splendid creature at her side. He could not tell which was the lovelier.

There was that about the golden-haired wife of Tom Brittle that stirred every heart that saw her. Was it the gleam of her golden hair in the slanting sunlight by day or the red from the draperies now shining in the gaslight? It was neither, so thought the lawyer. The full dark-blue eyes, marked like the hidden violets in the wood, were turned full upon him, and the man could feel the same spell that Tom Brittle had undergone on the train that long time ago. In the depths Mathers could see sleeping an emotion such as few women possess. And a dead secret

was there also. But no mind could read the thought of Hilda Brittle.

There was a stir in the outer hall. A servant was announcing Mr. Frank Wentworth.

Each woman in the room turned instinctively toward the newcomer.

Ruth allowed her eyes to rest upon the handsome face while a sickening dread crowded all other thoughts from her mind. There was not one feature in the faultless face like that of the Frank Wentworth she had known and lost. But the lawyer had risen and was going through with the introductions. Another in the room was of paler countenance than the girl longing for her lover. Hilda Brittle was gazing at Wentworth with an expression upon her face as if some apparition had risen from the grave.

She tried to draw herself together, but the man had her hand before she could answer his polite, courteous question. Then she noted that he remembered her. In the fair, sweet girl whose life he had ruined there had risen a woman of such magnificence that the new heir caught his breath. Something of the old passion stirred his wicked

heart while a flame of love leapt into the darkened eyes.

Mrs. Mathers welcomed the young fellow with sisterly interest, glad for the sake of the very pale girl that he had returned to.

The pleasantries of an evening where all felt a little restrained passed off as well as possible. Ruth could say but little, and the misery depicted in Hilda's face was noticed by none but the man himself. He seemed to take a fiendish joy in torturing, for much of his conversation was directed toward her. But who will not give him the credit of a feeling better than that of worrying a good woman? He was often thinking of those past days, and once when a look of desperation came into the pleading blue eyes as he suavely asked her a personality he answered the look with one of warning, and for a time turned his attention to Ruth, who had been sitting demurely listening. She had nothing to say, and wanted less to do with this handsome man who was not the Frank Wentworth she had known and loved. There was some hideous mistake which could not be accounted for. Her

uncle said that he had plainly shown that he was the Wentworth who was heir to the money. Then there must be two Frank Wentworths. Once, after the dinner was finished, the new heir stooped to pick a fallen match from the floor. Something so familiar in the position brought Ruth from the present into the past. Again she stood before the open window, watching the wind lash the pine branches in its fury. Again her eyes were upon the wood. She thought she saw the same two men, and this stooping stranger melted before her eyes into the creeping man who was following her beloved. Would that trick of her fancy never leave her mind? Was she so closely allied with the occult that she could look into the future? More vividly did the idea take root that her lover was living, and that some time he would come to her, and that this handsome stranger so suavely putting the burnt match in the receiver would figure largely in it.

Hilda Brittle excused herself and went to Ruth's room. The moment the door closed upon her she threw herself down upon the bed. "He has returned!" sobbed she, "and my happiness is

ended. It seemed that I ought to have shrieked out his duplicity to those dear people, but I could not." So the tearful soliloquy went on until her grief was spent. What should she do and where go? Hilda knew that her husband was too upright to countenance any such a thing. And then she, too, would be too noble to live with a man to whom she was not married. Hilda wondered if the time would come that she could ask the man what he had meant by deceiving her with a false report of his death. Her thoughts went to that day upon the train when she had first met her dear husband. She tossed the warm, damp hair from her hot brow. It seemed that the day would never end. Ruth she did not want to see for a time, so that she could regain her composure. From below she could hear the prelude of a song, the familiar strains of which almost drove her mad. She had heard the voice now rising and falling in passionate strains singing the same songs years ago when she had been a trusting girl. And had she not played for him to sing? Hilda's heart seemed about to break. Up in the beautiful home she could see the man she loved

waiting with impatience her return. Ah, and she loved him as he had never been loved before! As the beautiful voice came to her from below Hilda covered her ears that the sound might be shut out. She had grown to hate the man. Rising from her bed with nervous tremor she took a sudden resolution. She would see and speak with him. That would be the only feasible way to find the history that she might be able to tell her husband why she had married him when the father of the little lost child was still living.

CHAPTER VII.

WITH this determination Hilda arranged her toilet again. She called the maid, and the soft tresses which were the pride of a certain loving man whom she knew, were again coiled in their place.

Then Hilda, despite the sign of tears upon her face, went into the room below and waited while the voice finished the singing.

The looked-for opportunity came when Ruth complained of a severe headache and asked to be excused. Mr. and Mrs. Mathers were in one of their usual disputes, and Hilda, with a motion of her white hand, beckoned to the man that he follow her into the conservatory.

Wentworth, with the nonchalance of a king, sauntered along, well knowing the confusion of his companion. He knew that perfect control of one's emotion carried the day always.

Hilda proceeded to a fountain's side and sank upon the gilded bench. The man took a seat in silence.

For a moment neither spoke, the woman bending over and picking up a handful of sparkling water, letting it fall drop by drop from between her fingers.

"So you are here, a friend in the house of Mathers, are you, and a more than friend to the girl?"

This was his greeting, and the woman was not sorry, although she thought she saw the same passionate gleam in his eyes, as she again picked up more water.

"You are married again," said he; "so the little maid tells me."

"Yes."

"And you are happy?"

"More so than at any other time in my life. I love my husband better than my life."

"Complimentary to me, isn't it?"

The man was one of those individuals who could only see pleasure in other people's unhappiness. If Hilda had told him that she was un-

happy, that her domestic relations with the rich man whom she had married were unpleasant, he would have been content. How coldly the blue eyes looked upon him! He was willing always to make a conquest of a beautiful woman, and certainly this little former love of his was very beautiful.

"You need not look so alarmed; I am not anxious to let our relations be known. It will not hurt your life any, but you need not be so cold to me."

"You will not put your hands upon me," said the woman, in an undertone so intense that the man withdrew his long, white fingers from her white flesh.

"And I told you not to be so distant. You know why I have come here, and that I am not the man in the position I fill. You are the only living person knowing it."

"And you think I shall allow you to step into a dead man's shoes and usurp a position wrongfully?"

"You will do as I say," said the man, muttering it more than speaking in a decided tone.

"Why did you allow me to think that you were dead?"

"It suited my purpose, just then. What did you do with the child?"

Hilda told the plaintive story with many tears and sobs. After all, this man held a peculiar position, which no other living one could hold. Was he not the father of her boy, whether the child were dead or living?

Wentworth, as he must be called, slipped his arm about the waist of the unhappy woman, but somehow out of the crimson light which surrounded them she could see a pair of pleading grey eyes, hear a voice whisper in her ear that the love of a pure, good man awaited her. She drew herself from the embrace and sat up very straight. Her eyes sparkled through the tears, and she nervously dried her finger upon a lace handkerchief.

Wentworth muttered an oath. He would have liked nothing better than to have this splendid creature throw herself into one of those old displays of frenzy and passion that he so well re-

membered. But she was sitting as prim as a Quaker, waiting for him to speak.

"Then you do not know whether the little fellow is dead or not?" he felt compelled to say. He did not want to get Hilda into a great temper, for there was no telling what she would do.

"No."

"And you have searched for him?"

"Everywhere."

"Then I would say the best thing for you to do is to forget that you were ever a mother and be happy."

"I shall never be that again, for my husband would not live with me were he to know that I had another husband living."

"You have not," fell from the full, red lips of the man.

"What do you mean?" asked Hilda.

"That you were never my wife, as you supposed."

Hilda Brittle drew a long breath. For a moment a great wave of thankfulness swept over her. She was then, no matter what the past had been, the wife of her beloved. He had told her never

to mention the old days of her folly again to him. The only safe, sacred subject which each one felt could always be mentioned was the little golden-haired boy, with his father's dark eyes.

Suddenly there rushed over her a feeling of disgust. She remembered the ceremony so well upon that winter night. The solemn minister, with his long gown, the sober witnesses and the falling shadows.

"How dare you say this to me?" gasped she. "I hate you for the deception."

"I should think you would feel very much obligated to me," was the flippant answer, as the man placed his fingers in the water and scattered a few bright drops upon a tall fern overhanging the fountain.

"I, by my duplicity, made it possible for you to be a wife, and yet keep your husband ignorant of the fact that you are not just what you seem."

More and more did the hatred swell in the white bosom. How she hated this calm, cruel man, as he sat talking to her about the best impulses of her life and chiding her for weeping over a blasted character, and a little lost child.

"Hush," commanded she; "I hate you more than all the world."

He saw that there was no use to try force with her, so he silently sent the drops of water again upon the fern.

"How did you accomplish such a thing?" said she, lifting her heavy eyes to his face.

"Friends who are always willing to be paid for such services as that." He said this as if he were reciting a verse or a childish fairy story.

"Did you pay that clergyman to perform a mock marriage?" asked the trembling lips.

"He was but a poor devil in hard luck, with two companions who were willing to do anything I asked them for five dollars."

Hilda's golden head sank upon her breast. The glint of the red light sparkled in the water and shone through the yellow hair. The man never felt a keener impulse in his life to take a woman in his arms.

"How can you stand there and tell me of my dishonor?" and saying this a thought so vitally awful came into her mind that a sharp cry was wrung from her lips.

She could see the two men now as they signed their names upon a little book in the church. She could hear the solemn tones of the tall man as he pronounced her the wife of him before her. She supposed that there had been much glee over her innocence afterward, and it was this that made her heart beat with agony.

"You have but to keep still," said the man, "and that precious husband of yours will never be the wiser."

"Nevertheless, I shall tell him," she said, with dogged determination.

"I suppose that means that you will expose me?" asked Wentworth, rising.

"I don't know what I mean?" was the answer, while the sweet voice had a death-like intonation in it.

"It would be well for you to keep silent," warned the man. "It can do you no good to tell the exact situation. And the man is dead, you know."

"If I knew that he were dead," whispered Hilda. "I cannot bear to think you are fooling a good girl and taking the place of a living man."

"You need not worry about that little maid in there," and Wentworth waved his hand toward the room where they could hear voices, first angry and then loving. Hilda knew that the lawyer and his wife were having an altercation.

"I am not the man she wants to marry," went on Hilda's companion, "but I can win her if she does not know about us. It will only make a bad bargain worse to tell your husband about this matter. Does he know about the child?"

Too well he knew about the little boy. She could hear the deep tones, with satisfaction in them, tell her that he was so glad that no dishonor was attached to her name.

She was so glad at that time, too, but now it was different. She would have to go back and put her arms about his neck and tell her beloved the awful story. All about how the little baby lad was not in the world rightfully; how she had been duped and destroyed. There was some consolation about the thought that she had not known. Would he send her from him? Hilda could hear the intonation of the voices on the

inside, also the man was again speaking. She drew herself together and tried to listen.

"I hope to win Ruth Ferris for my wife. It need not hurt you in any way, but it is doubtful if I ever love any one as I did you, Hilda."

"Hush!" gasped Hilda. "I do not want to hear the word from your lips. You allowed my innocent baby to come into the world without a name; there is nothing you would not do. I love that little girl there in that large house, weeping out her heart for a dead lover, too well for you to impose yourself upon her."

"Then if she refuses me, Frank Wentworth, I am to have the fortune, and if I have that I can live without the girl."

"Then that is what you had better do," said Hilda, "for I do not believe I can stand by and see you marry her."

"How have you fooled them so effectually?" asked Hilda after a time, with set teeth.

"I had the papers of a certain dead man," explained her companion. "They were all that I needed."

Hilda heard Ruth's voice calling her, and with

scant courtesy she rose and Wentworth walked by her side, in through the door and out into the hall. It cannot but be admitted that with the strong personality of the woman he felt something of the old-time emotion stirring his blood. He watched her as she gracefully ascended the stairs and passed from his sight.

"She is certainly charming," muttered he; "much more so than my little fawn, Ruth, but she has the money, and that is what you are playing for now, Mr. Wentworth."

Mrs. Mathers appeared at the door, and the lawyer, with beaming countenance, was at her heels. They were constantly together, even though they quarreled by day and night.

"You are going?" said the lady of the house, looking about for the girls. "Do you mean to say those naughty children have run away and left you alone?"

"That is nothing, let me assure you, my dear Mrs. Mathers," said the man. "I have spent a delightful evening, and I consider myself very fortunate."

The lawyer, looking over his wife's shoulder,

thought so too. Could any man ask for a better future than this?—a beautiful girl and a big fortune. The new heir walked along with a very satisfied mind. He had no idea that Hilda would tell this handsome husband of hers about that girlish escapade of which the wife knew nothing until that night.

* * * * * * *

The two girls were in each other's arms. Ruth thought Hilda was weeping over her disappointment. But little did the girl realize the heartache of her beautiful friend.

Hilda did not feel that she was called upon to tell her story now, so she listened while Ruth lamented her terrible misfortune.

"I cannot see how the mistake was made," said she, "for I always supposed Frank's uncle and mine were the best of friends. That there should be two Frank Wentworths is most improbable."

Hilda said nothing, brushing back the curls from the white brow.

"I would not give up the hope of seeing your darling," she at last found voice to say. "You know that fate has a kindly future in store."

She groaned inwardly as she said this, thinking of the heart-husband who had been so loving to her, wondering if he would forgive a sin which she had really not committed.

She pressed the beautiful face of her friend close to hers. All this trouble seemed only to draw them nearer together.

"I know one thing," and Ruth, with a snap of her pretty white teeth sat up and drew herself from the surrounding arms. "I know one thing —I will never marry that man as long as there is life in my body."

Hilda took a long breath. This was just what she wanted to hear. As long as Ruth held to this resolution she was safe and would not make any disclosures to the girl. But she felt that she loved the little maid too well to allow her to marry a rogue and a falsifier.

The two girls talked long during the night. Hilda decided that she would go home in the morning. Ruth demurred, but when the woman promised that she would soon return she reluctantly allowed her to pack her belongings and went to the train with her.

The Mathers were shocked when Ruth disclosed the fact that the new heir was not the man she loved. This was all she would say, but Mrs. Mathers kept returning to the subject, saying that she hoped the girl would think twice before she allowed a wealthy and handsome young fellow to slip between her fingers.

Hilda Brittle settled back in her seat with the greatest mixture of emotions she had ever experienced. As the train sped on into the hills she shed many bitter tears at the shape her life had taken since leaving home. Would the large-hearted man forgive her and take her to his breast again? Somehow it seemed to the girl that now she had once known his love she could not live without him. He had grown infinitely dearer since the day he told her not to think of the past; that he loved her for herself alone.

"If he will but take a broad view of the matter," said she to herself, with her face in her hands; "if he would but see that I am not any more to blame than I was before. But men alway think a woman ought to know everything."

Such thoughts as these burned their way into

the girl's heart. What was the use of being beautiful if she could not have her heart's desire? What would money be, without Tom?

The night drew on and still the train thundered through the hills. Still the woman kept her face buried in her hands, or pressed against the window-pane.

She had left home but a few hours ago with only a feeling of joy for Ruth.

She was returning only to leave it again.

As the engine steamed its way to the depot Hilda could see the lights from her home. The dear little red attic light was burning as of old. She could see the figures of the servants as they passed to and fro in front of the windows. She could even discern with her tear-stained eyes a little black footman as he appeared upon the porch and looked through the darkness at the train as it pulled into the station. Of course, Tom would be there waiting for her. He always was, especially when she dispatched him in the morning that she was coming. Hilda remembered the feeling of trust that surged into her

heart as she signed her name to the blank, and knew that even in spite of the man masquerading at the Mathers she was Hilda Brittle.

She would rather be the discarded wife of the one than to be ever with Gerson again. Never had she felt such a loathing for any human being! For one thing she was thankful. Ruth had sworn to her that she would never marry that man. He could have the money, for all either one of them cared, but to link that sweet life with such a one would be more than Hilda could bear.

She was peering out of the window, her eyes hot with tears. Through the mist which had settled over the valley she could see the porters hurrying to their duties. Hilda wondered if each one had a wife at home as beautiful as she, and if there were any woman in the world so absolutely miserable.

There was Tom, she could see him. He was only waiting for the train to stop to spring to the platform and clasp her in his arms. She felt the big form close to hers, felt the hot breath breathing upon her lips and heard Tom Brittle call her his love, his wife and his darling.

CHAPTER VIII.

HILDA did not say much to her husband as he led her to the carriage and they drove home. She rested her head against the big, protecting arm and wept so silently that he did not discover it until he was lifting her from the vehicle.

"Are you so glad to get back, my pretty," whispered he, "that the bright tears fall from these beautiful eyes?"

Brittle lifted the face to his and kissed it. How he had grown to love that beautiful, bright woman since she had filled his home with sunshine!

Through the dinner hour Hilda's eyes sought Tom's, making a silent plea for her future. But the big fellow did not realize that anything unusual was happening or had happened, so he told his wife all the things which had occurred since her going away.

Hilda resolved that she would tell the story before going to bed for the night. The loving ears should hear, and the dear heart have a chance to forgive her if it so desired. The woman felt that she could not go through the dark night framing an explanation.

Tom offered her assistance by asking if she did not want to go with him to their quiet room, where they could converse away from the ears of the servants.

Hilda allowed her weight to linger against the large arms after they had reached the landing. Would she ever be in just that position again? And how should she tell him all that was in her heart?

The low flame of the grate filled the room with a red glow. Tom made a movement to light the gas, but Hilda stopped him, saying that she wanted to kneel at his feet, that she had something to tell him.

Together they sat down. Tom Brittle had never seen such a look of concern upon the dear face he loved so devotedly. He knew that something was coming, but what?

Hilda waited and looked into the little red flame. She was pondering on how to begin.

"I do not know how to begin," sobbed she, putting her head on the large knee.

"Just start," gravely answered her husband. "I want my wife not to fear me."

But he did not know what was coming. He waited and the little flame burned itself out and died away.

Presently Hilda leaned over and took the brass poker and stirred it again into life. Then she took the large, white hand lovingly in hers.

"Sweetheart," began she, weeping over the long fingers, "if that which I tell you hurts your heart will you try in the bigness of it to forgive my part in it? I hope you will take me to your dear heart, as you have always done."

"Is it something which will hurt our love, Hilda?"

The tones were so intense and deep that Hilda uttered a little cry.

"Please, before I commence, tell me that you will pardon—oh, Tom, I cannot bear it."

Tom's face had grown so white, his lips

trembling until Hilda thought he was going to cry.

"Something has happened to you since you have been away—something I ought to know?"

The man had never imagined anything so bad as was now in his mind. Could she have forgotten him while from home? Seriously he began to speak: "Hilda, darling, do not keep me in suspense. I love you, and this you know."

The assurance was just what the girl needed. If his love were only large enough to overlook a gruesome past!

"Do you remember, Tom," she began, moving the little coals again with the lifter, "the story I told you about the baby and how I lost him?"

"Of course."

"And how I married his father in the little church covered with ivy?"

"Yes."

"I have seen the man again; he is not dead."

Hilda felt the tightening of the muscles and knew that the shot had told, but he waited for her to proceed.

But again she stopped until the flame was no

more. But the darkness seemed oppressive and she arose and taking a match from the shelf lighted the brilliant overhanging chandelier.

Tom Brittle had not spoken, and waited for her to seat herself again at his knee. The thought flashed through his mind that he had never seen so graceful a woman, but did the fair body belong to him?

"Then you are not my wife?" he said, lifting the eyes to his. "I cannot say that Hilda Brittle is my little wife any more?"

The blue eyes pierced through the tears into the glint of the grey.

Hilda sprang into the longing arms held out toward her.

"Oh, yes, you can, dear," sobbed she. "I was not married to him, so he says."

"Then there was no ceremony, as you told me?"

"Yes, but a dishonorable one."

Hilda started at the beginning and told the story of how she and Ruth had dressed for the meeting of the heir, Wentworth, and she, his wife, Hilda, found the betrayer of her girlhood. The red lips were raised pleadingly toward the

large, dark head above her, but Tom Brittle did not move. Hilda only dropped her face upon the knee which had so long been her place.

She had decided to make a hard fight for the man whom she loved.

He made no stir, and Hilda would have thought him sleeping had it not been for the story she had told him.

"Tom," began she, after an agonizing moment, "won't you speak to me? There was dishonor, but it was not my fault."

The strong arms opened and the golden head again rested upon the broad breast that had sheltered her from many a storm.

"Am I to stay with you, my beloved?" queried she, with trembling.

"I am your husband," answered the deep, passionate voice. "I was but thinking how terrible it would have been but for that man's perfidy. Remember, Hilda, I am not upholding crime," said Tom, after the story had been told, "and it was a crime toward you, but the silver lining to my darling's cloud now is that she is mine, mine, mine!"

Long after Tom had slept, Hilda lay with singing heart. The old smart of her trouble had disappeared, sent into the shadows of the past by her good husband. Had he not told her to forget it now, and if ever she should be troubled in any way with thoughts or the presence of the man she was to come to Tom. This would be easy, for had he not forgiven all, and she was so happy.

* * * * * * *

Ruth told Mrs. Mathers not to count upon a wedding with her as the bride, as she would not marry the new heir. He was not the man she loved and that was all there was to it.

"But you say, yourself, dear," said she, "that he looks like Frank."

"That may be true, but he is not Frank, and I am not going to marry him."

Mrs. Mathers always noticed that if the pearly teeth came together with a snap then she could make up her mind Ruth meant to have her own way.

Gerson came every day. He shadowed the girl's footsteps; there would be no losing her if he had power left to charm.

Evening after evening she played for him to sing, and each time wished it might be the last. Hilda had refused an invitation to come down right away and Ruth felt lonely.

One evening the girl sat in the same spot where Gerson had told Hilda that he had not married her in the little ivy-covered church.

He, under the name of Frank Wentworth, was now trying to lay siege to the heart of Ruth Ferris.

"I have loved you since the time I first rested my eyes upon you, Ruth," he pleaded. "I will be very tender with you; there shall not be one wish of yours left ungranted."

"But you understand," faltered Ruth, "that I love another man. He is to me the only one."

"What if I should prove to you that this other Frank Wentworth is dead and buried?"

"Then I should hate the messenger that brought to me such tidings."

The man bit his lip until it whitened under the pressure.

"I am not to blame for his death," he replied, in a low tone. "You are hard upon a fellow."

Ruth, ever tender-hearted, caught the extended hand in hers.

"Mr. Wentworth," said she, "do not misunderstand me. I do not wish to do you an injustice, but I am not responsible for the dictates of my heart. I would not place in your life a woman who is loving another man, be he living or dead." Ruth's companion tossed his head defiantly. He would win this girl, if she could love with such untiring fervor.

"You have made me love you, my sweetheart," said he, trying another tactic, but the girl moved from his encircling arm.

"I do not wish for your caresses," said she.

Mrs. Mathers, in a piece of advice which she had previously given the newcomer, said that a girl's heart was filled with wrinkles, and when one wrinkle proved unsatisfactory, another would come to cover it up and the old love would be buried. But poor Wentworth, desiring with all his heart the girl who was sitting beside him, thought that her heart must be of different calibre.

* * * * * * *

Hilda Brittle could not get out of her mind the golden-haired child she had seen selling flowers and papers. She had not mentioned him to Tom for fear that he would think her whimsical. But one morning when her husband had gone to Buffalo she hurriedly put on her garments and took the train for New York.

Not letting her friends know anything about it, she went directly toward the slums. The Bowery looked the same, and Hilda recognized the same little dirty children who had passed and repassed that day she was speaking to the boy.

She ordered the cab to drive up and down, and kept her eyes strained upon the children that passed.

It seemed an eternity before she heard a great whoop and a string of children came tearing down the street. In the center of the gang was the little golden-haired boy. His face was plastered with candy, his legs bare and dirty, but Hilda did not care. She wanted to talk to him again.

An old woman with but few teeth and with signs of dissipation, ran out of a house near-by.

"Midge!" screamed she, with shaking fist, "will you come here? I wants youse."

Hilda saw the boy drop down among the children, hiding from the terrible creature.

"Where in de devil is dat kid?" shouted the woman, as she came rushing on toward the dirty bunch of urchins.

"He ain't here, mum," said an older child, pushing back toward Midge, for since the boy had asserted himself and insisted upon the trousers due his dignity and years, the little fellow had been proclaimed King of the Bowery.

But the sharp eyes of the old hag were as edged as her teeth. She saw a golden gleam, and, stooping down, picked the child out from among the rest by his curls. The roar that went up from the red lips was anything but refined, and a few oaths dropped from between the set teeth.

"Let me go, you old wench!" shouted the lad. "I hate you, you let me go!" But he was being walked away by the hair of his head, and had not Hilda interfered there is no telling what would have happened to Midge.

Mag turned as the beautiful lady drove to her side.

"Is that the child who sells the flowers?" said she, thinking if she told her real errand she would be balked by the hag. "I purchased some from him the other day, and want some more."

The long, bony fingers loosened themselves from the curls, and Midge stood with drooping eyes before the first woman who had ever kissed him. Well did the little chap remember that caress! He had even hated to wash his face for fear of losing the sweet sensation. But he remembered that next morning after a ducking in the river his heart had burned as hard and the kiss was as sweet as when first placed there by the rosy lips of the beauty.

"You will take this money, woman," said Hilda, holding out a bill toward the old hag, "and let the child come in here with me, so that he can get me some more flowers."

"Ah, that's right, my little boy," wheedled she. "He is such a good boy, and gives his mother all the money he gets. I loves dat boy, I do." And croning over the paper in her hand she

watched the little lad bundled into the cab and the driver turn the horse's head toward Broadway. Midge counted himself a lucky boy. Maybe he would get another kiss. He had no doubt that the lady really did want the flowers, but another caress he must have.

Hilda said no word as they drove along, but Midge feared he was going to be cheated out of the kiss.

Raising his face toward hers, Hilda saw the black eyes which stirred her to the very soul, looking into her face.

"Will you do him ag'in?" and Midge delicately touched the sacred spot where the two beautiful lips had rested before.

The mother-heart in the woman opened like a flood. There was something in this dirty little child that carried her out of herself.

She placed her two arms tightly about him. Pressing her lips to his she gathered in the kisses as if hungry. The fair face of the boy flushed under the emotion, but Hilda remembered after he was gone that he clung to her with a fervor equal to her own.

"Do you live with that dreadful woman?" asked Hilda, when she had made the child understand that she only wanted to talk with him again, and did not want flowers.

"I lives with her, but she ain't my mother," was the answer.

"Have you no friends, then, at all? No one to kiss you like I did?" and the flood of color which swept over the woman's face to the lovely neck was answered by one equally vivid in the face of the boy.

"I were never kissed before," said he.

"Then, poor little fellow, you have not a friend in the world?"

"Oh, yes, I has one, and he is a good man; that is Mr. Wentworth, but he is awful sick and maybe won't get well."

Hilda caught her breath. Had the villain now seeking to marry a good girl lied to her as to the death of the heir to a fortune which Gerson had claimed?

She did not say anything for a long time, and then took the child's face in her hands and again kissed it. Midge was getting used to such warm,

passionate kisses; he could now enjoy it without the guilty flush.

"I love you, little lad," said Hilda, "and I wonder if you would like to come home and live with me?"

Ah, how strong are the ties of motherhood, and how tense the longing for her lost one! Who can tell but that the very vibrations of the air had led the golden-haired woman to the dark-eyed child in the Bowery?

CHAPTER IX.

"WILLING to go with her, to be kissed and loved forever?"

This was the thought that flashed over Midge, as with proprietary action he leaned back, with a sigh, in the cab.

"Would you like to live with me always?" Hilda said again.

"Course I would," replied the child," and I could have all der kisses you has, couldn't I?"

Hilda laughed happily. Something in her heart answered to the wish of the child for caresses.

"I have a good husband at my home, who would be very good to you, Midge." Hilda had almost said "Dicky." She would call him "Dick," if he should come home with her.

"Tell me about this Mr. Wentworth," said she. "Tell where he is and how he came to live in such a place."

"Well, youse see," began Midge, "dat he ain't

got no money. And his friend went off and left him for dead, so the man ain't got no one but me. I'll stand by him till the dogs are all et up."

"The what?" questioned Hilda.

"Dogs, weinerwursts, frankfurters," said the child, trying to explain away the mystified look that came into the blue eyes.

"Oh," was all she said.

Hilda did not forget to give the child enough money to appease the wrath of the woman with whom he lived, telling him that it would not be long before she would see him again. She took him into a store and purchased him a pretty suit, having his face washed at the barber shop, where the tangled hair was cleaned and put to rights.

Midge strutted along in his new boots and fine clothes, and Mag could not believe her eyes when he slipped another bill into her hand.

"You ain't goin' to wear them brand-new shoes, you little loafer," said she, with a squeak. "You take them right over to the shop and get a dollar an' bring it back to me."

"I guess not," replied Midge, "for the lady is comin' again, and she said if I did not have dese

clothes and dese boots she wouldn't guv me any more money."

So Mag looked at the money in her hand, and Midge at the fine clothes he had on, and both thought it a good bargain which had better stand.

Midge heard a weak voice calling him from above. With great pride he displayed himself to the admiring eyes of Frank Wentworth.

"A lady, a real, live lady guv me these things, Mr. Frank," said the happy child. "Did you ever see such shoes, and do youse know" (and here the boy blushed and looked about in fear that other ears beside Frank's would hear) "does youse know dat she kissed me till I lost my breath, I did. I'd ruther have dose kisses than dese here clothes."

Wentworth wiped away a tear. How the little heart had longed for love and caresses! He would prefer love to clothes, would this little child of the slums. Frank thought of Ruth. So would he; it was the same wherever a heart beat in the human breast. What was money compared to love?

Midge was swinging his feet from a high box

Mag had placed there to hold the small piece of candle. There was an expression Frank had never seen before upon the clean, shining face.

"She wants me to come and live wid her," said he at last, looking at the shiny tips of his new shoes, "and she has a good man, same relation dat Bill is to Mag."

"You mean her husband," said Frank.

"Yep, de old man what bosses her 'bout."

Frank did not explain that refined men never treated their wives as Bill did Mag. What was the use? The child would find that out, if it ever became his good fortune to be planted in new soil. And there would not be a happier man than Frank to know that the little waif had found a place in a good home. Midge was certainly a handsome little fellow.

"You will be glad to leave Mag and Bill?" asked Frank. "You are afraid of the man, are you not?"

"He's a bad man," said the child, squinting his eye along the light which shone from his boot-top. "He and er gang wot makes money under the sidewalk—bad, bad."

This was said in so low a tone that Frank could just hear it.

"They counterfeit money, do you mean, lad?"

"Yep, in the vault under the walk."

"Then keep away from them, Midge, and don't let them teach you to do bad things."

"I am goin' wid de lady," replied Midge, with conviction. "I ain't goin' to swear any more, eader. She kissed dese lips." Midge puckered up the rosebud mouth, out of which had come both blessings and curses.

Frank saw that already a good influence was at work. He was glad for the little lad.

"It does me good, child, to think of you in a better home," was all he said.

"And it would do me good could you find dat lady youse is worrying over. I taut I saw her one day, just like der locket."

Like a man snatching at a straw in midocean, so Frank Wentworth caught the child's hands in his.

"Where did you see her?"

Midge told of the time the carriage had stopped in the alleyway, and about the young lady who

thought that he, Midge, might hurt the yellow-haired girl.

"But I wouldn't hurt her, Mr. Frank," said Midge, filled with his own part of the story and forgetting how much the sick man wanted to know about the little dark-haired girl who afterward kept still while Hilda was talking, from the very shame of doubting the child.

"Do you suppose you could find her again, Midge?"

"You bet, when I see the other lady, and then I knows where dey lives, 'cause I went dere with flowers once."

Midge had taken a sudden resolution. He would go to the pretty young lady and look at her face again and see if it was the face in the locket, and if it were, he would tell her that a sick man wanted her very much. Midge never doubted for a moment that any woman loved by Frank Wentworth would be delighted to come and see him.

The boy stole downstairs with cat-like tread. He could hear the whispers of the old woman and Bill. Midge listened.

"He ain't der man he says he is," the child heard the man's voice say. "He er a-playin' he er the man upstairs, and is trying to get der money. I can make him guv me der rocks if we keep them apart."

Midge thought it was something about his friend. Closer the child came to the door.

"What er youse goin' to do?" asked Mag.

"See the new Mr. Wentworth and have him line my pockets with der dough and get der man upstairs out of der country. He has pulled the wool over der eyes of every one, and as long as he knows we want der rocks he will guv them to us."

This was enough for Midge. He crept back upstairs and came tumbling down. The conversation was hushed directly.

"Don't be gone long, Midge," yelled Mag, but the boy scurried away and was gone before either Bill or the woman could stop him.

It did not take him long to steal enough rides upon the street cars to bring him to the Mathers home. He lingered outside, hoping to see the small girl whose face he knew shone in the locket.

For a long time the child waited. It was not tedious, for was it not an errand of love?

Suddenly the large door opened and Ruth came out alone. She had no hat on, as the day was warm. She crossed the road to the little park and entered it.

Midge scurried after her with the agility of a rabbit and passed her with a knowing look upon his face.

The girl sat down on a bench, evidently thinking.

Midge, with a nerve born in the Bowery, seated himself beside her. He had come for a specific reason. He would not allow her to go without telling her now of the picture in the locket and the loving man alone in the garret room.

"What do you want, little boy? A nickel?"

"No, ma'am; I wanted to look in youse face and see if it ain't the one he holds next to his heart."

"Whose heart?" asked the girl, incredulously.

"Mr. Wentworth's," said the boy, pronouncing the man's name distinctly.

"What Mr. Wentworth? I have never given him a picture in all my life."

"He says you did, miss, and he is awfully sick; maybe youse don't know it, but he loves youse awfully well."

"Of whom are you speaking, child?" said Ruth, turning on the boy sharply.

"Mr. Wentworth, who is sick, but he is going to get up to-day. He lives in der Bowery wid the old hag. But every night"—and here Midge grew confidential—"every night he kisses youse face, and when he was real sick he called youse name always."

Ruth stood up and loosened her collar. It seemed that she would choke to death. What was the child saying to her, and about whom was he speaking?

"Child, do you know of a Frank Wentworth, who is ill?"

"'Deed I does, miss, and he kisses youse picture every night." Midge was growing eloquent. His dark eyes flashed fire and the glint of the sunshine through the golden hair struck Ruth as strangely familiar. She thought it was the same color as Hilda's, only, of course, short in curls about the babyish face.

Midge, seeing that the girl waited for him to speak, started in from the beginning. He told of the time the two men came there for a room for one—Frank Wentworth and Richard Gerson. Ruth started at that name. Again she thought of Hilda and the little lost boy.

After the child had finished, he explained that he loved the roomer so very much that he would be glad to know that he was happy.

"It's cold to always kiss glass," said the child; "and dat is what he does."

Ruth knew this, also, for had not her own heart called for a warm, passionate face to caress rather than the one which lay in the little box, the key of which hung about her neck?

The child went back, as quietly as he had come, to the Bowery home. He would tell the sick man about the girl and give him the guarded message which she sent. Ruth had been afraid to hope, but never once did she think that the other Mr. Wentworth was an impostor and that the sick man in the horrible garret was her Frank. How quickly she would have followed Midge had she known! But she sent advice as to his health, and

mentally made up her mind that she would go herself and see the man sometime.

Midge reached home and went straight to the garret. The room was empty and Frank was gone. That morning he had heard the patient say that the doctor had consented to his walking a little in the sunshine. So Midge went below and asked Mag if she knew where the boarder was.

"You mind youse own business," stormed the woman; "youse is always too smart. He is out a-walkin'."

This was all Midge wanted to know. He sat for a long time upon the step, waiting, until the sun went down behind the tall buildings and the shadows lengthened in the street and a cool breeze blew up from the river.

* * * * * *

Frank Wentworth lay for a long time after Midge had left him. He thought of the little dark girl of whom the child had spoken. He loved Ruth now with all the strength of his returning fire. He was getting well. Many things rushed through his head.

Where had Gerson disappeared to? One would

have thought the man would have returned to bury a dear, dead friend. But no sight of his college chum nor no word since the day Frank Wentworth had virtually died in the slums.

He got up slowly and dressed in his light suit. He looked thin and haggard, but congratulated himself that he was living.

"Somehow I feel happy now," said he, almost whispering it to himself. "I will walk in the sun; it will cheer me up. I wonder if Midge really saw Ruth. The world is not so large, after all," he sighed. The sight of the tall, thin, pale man started an ejaculation from Mag.

"Youse had better not go far," said she, lifting a warning finger. "Youse look like a bag of bones now, youse does."

Frank smiled wanly. How beautiful looked the day to him! The returning life rushing through his veins gave him a new incentive to live.

Only to see Ruth and to know that she loved him would be Heaven! Once in the park at Fourteenth street he drank in the long draughts of air.

He sat with his head resting upon his hand and noted not the passers-by until one familiar voice broke upon his ear.

"As I live, are you not Frank Wentworth?" Richard Gerson stood before the sick man in all the style of the season. Frank, as he rose to his feet, thought he had never seen a handsomer man in all his life. How happy he was to stretch out his hand to take the dear fingers in his. But to his surprise there was no answering response. Gerson was simply looking at him as if a spectre had arisen from the tomb and an accusing finger was pointing toward him. He edged away and then said:

"I thought you were dead," and there was almost a look of unbelief in the black eyes. "You cannot expect me to believe against my senses."

"But I did not die, and I am getting almost well enough to go to the office. Are you still there?"

"No, it is closed. Since leaving you, I have come into some money, hence our future will be as far apart as our pasts were linked together."

The sick man must have no opportunity to

come into his own. He must be gotten out of the country. What a miserable meeting, and where was his sense in asking the man if he were living?

"The shock was natural, Dick," said Frank, "but you should not go back on your old friend."

"Circumstances alter cases," answered Gerson; "and you will do well not to follow me about."

A look of hauteur spread over the pale face. He clutched at the bench-arm.

"You need not exercise yourself. I do not push myself where I am not wanted."

"There, there, old fellow, don't worry," soothed Gerson, a plan coming into his head. "I spoke rashly. I want to send you abroad for your health. I have plenty of money now."

"I would not accept one penny from your hands if I were starving. I wish you to pass on and leave me to myself."

For a long time the man sat with his face in his hands, the dreams of the future dashed to the ground. Gerson had been his life-long friend. He loved him still, God help him, but there should be no more intercourse between them.

CHAPTER X.

GERSON left the spot where Frank was sitting, with conflicting emotions. He had not dreamed for one moment the man was not dead. He thought at first it was a ghost walking out of the past when he had seen the emaciated body resting on the bench. Why he had spoken to him he could not tell.

As he walked along he saw he was within a door or two of the house where Frank lived. What fate had directed his steps there? Only the hum of old Mag's voice could be heard through the dirty window. Then Gerson saw Bill Maglone open the door and walk out.

"Coming back soon?" he heard Mag sing out.

Only a grunt was the answer.

Here was the very person Gerson wanted. With an air of authority he took the ragged arm, telling the man he had a business transaction to make with him.

"And I wanted to see youse, too," said Bill, a little warily, for he did not know what this fine gentleman might want with him.

Gerson explained that it was to his advantage that the presence of Frank Wentworth should not be known in the city.

Bill answered, with alertness, that he knew why, and before Gerson could answer, the jail-bird had told of the scene in the garret and how he had known all along that a false man was standing in his friend's shoes.

Now, more than ever, did the man realize that Bill's mouth must be closed with gold. They laid plans whereby Frank Wentworth could be kept out of the way until he had promised to go abroad, and then all would be well.

"You must keep him hid in some way," said Gerson, firmly, "for if certain people get a sight of his face the game will all be off. Do you understand?"

Bill stuck out his tongue and rolled a large quid of tobacco into his cheek.

"Leave the sick bird to me. I always did hate him, he was so tender with the kid. Why, once

after I had strapped the brat, I saw the fellow bathing off the blood wid a wet rag."

Gerson shuddered.

Such cruelty as was in the big, ugly body would deal summarily with the weak man he had left in the park.

As he walked away a good impulse came over him to undo the dreadful work. He was taken back into the past when, one day, he, with five other good fellows, lay waiting for the coming of a maiden. Yet Gerson could hear the sweet voice sing:

"The hours I have spent with you, dear heart,
Are as a string of pearls to me."

And again the heated imagination could detect the sigh which came with the words:

"I kiss each bead and strive at last
To learn to kiss the cross."

How many times had the lips which he would have given worlds to press, kissed that same cross she had sung about! How many tears had washed

away the gilt from her rosary, the incense of which would not and should not bless Frank Wentworth!

This thought made Gerson wheel about. He hailed a cab, and looking out of the window as he was being driven toward the avenue, he saw Bill walk thoughtfully into the hovel where he had left his wife.

There was much whispering between Bill and Mag, once the woman strenuously objecting to something. She got up and walked to a place in the floor and raised a trap-door. Into this she peered, flashing the stub of a candle about to see the interior.

"He would die in there," said she, after the examination.

"Not if he will do as I tell him," was the answer. "He don't need to stay dere three hours if he will go from the country, and a good gentleman will pay his way."

"He must have a bug up his sleeve, this good man," sneered Mag. "Oh, you can't fool me, Bill. Youse is a-goin' to hurt that boy."

"Ain't not," reiterated the man. "Won't do

nothin' to him but keep him from the light of day."

"And I can guv him food and water as long as he is there?"

"Feed him on the best in der land, Mag, if youse wishes, only don't let der kid know where he is."

Mag loved the ugly faced man who was talking to her. He had promised to take her away from the Bowery back to their old home in Ireland if their plans worked, and as long as they would not hurt the lad then she was in for the money.

Hardly had they ceased planning before the door opened and Frank walked in. Now was the time for action.

"Oh, I say, Mr. Wentworth, you have never seen the shop I work in, have youse?" asked Bill in such a friendly tone that the sick man turned.

"I believe not," he answered, languidly. "Where is it?"

"Hold the candle, old woman, so the lad can see to the very depths."

Frank cautiously stepped into the foul-smelling cellar. The air made him feel faint.

"This is where we do our work," said Bill, lifting a huge hammer and then dropping it on the floor. "You can see by the thickness of dis wall dat no human bein' on der outside can hear one t'ing from der inside."

"How do you ventilate it?" asked Frank, peering at the moulds and such-like things lying in confusion upon the floor.

"We leaves the door open into the kitchen at night; 'twouldn't do to hev a window, with snooping kids about."

Frank made a move toward the stairs. But the powerful body of Bill Maglone had borne him to the earth before he could speak.

"You're goin' to stay in here for awhile," said he, with a sneer, as he fixed a chained padlock about the ankle. "There is a gentleman who is anxious to hev you go abroad for youse health, and when youse says youse will go, then we will take you from this place."

No amount of persuading could make the counterfeiter change his mind. Frank watched the man as he climbed the stairs and rapped three times upon the door. The trap lifted, the fellow

squeezed through and the patient was alone. All he could hear was the slight noise of walking upon the floor overhead. He knew that the outside world was as far away as the depths of a tomb would be from the shining sun. There would be no use to call for help, he knew this. It would be better to keep his waning strength for future use.

It was at this time that Midge came home with the little meagre message which the dark-haired girl had sent. The long wait on the steps, the coming night, the darkness, and yet no Frank, filled the child with the sense of coming evil. He could not imagine what had come to his friend. Mag came out once and kicked the child into action.

"Get along wid youse," shouted she, "and don't sit there like a stupid fool!"

But the boy only moved to a step farther up the street and remained silent. After it had become so late that he feared a beating he stole back into the house and laid twenty-five cents beside the sleeping old woman, whom the husband had charged not to leave the room during his

absence. Midge, without supper, climbed the stairs and proceeded to take off his small trousers and slide into bed. The money on her plate satisfied the woman the boy was indoors. She did not take the trouble to investigate, and Midge slept a troubled sleep until morning. The first break of day he peeped into the cot where Frank Wentworth had slept for months. But as on the night before it was empty, and the child again sank into a slumber until the loud voice of Mag aroused him. She wanted him to go to the store. The little fellow slipped heartlessly into his clothes. He did not dare to mention the boarder for fear of a slap. He hoped something would be said, but the coffee, with the sweet bread, was eaten and with silence the boy and man departed for their respective business. Soon Midge was singing out his flowers along Broadway, while Bill slouched to a meeting with the new Wentworth.

* * * * * * *

Hilda had come into town again to see Ruth. The girl confided to her the conversation she had with the small boy, and together the two ordered

the carriage and went into the district where Hilda had first seen the child, Midge.

As they drove slowly along, Ruth spied the flower child.

She bade the footman to hail him, and Hilda drew aside and allowed the boy to seat himself beside her. The wistful eyes asked again the old question and the woman stooped down and kissed the sweet face.

"Did you take the message to the gentleman you told me about, little boy?" asked Ruth, eagerly.

"No, ma'am; he er gone, and I don't know where he is."

"When did he go?"

"The time I came to you, miss."

"It does not seem possible that a man could disappear wholly from sight. Did he not leave any address?"

"Not that I knows on," replied the child.

At this moment a most peculiar thing happened. The new Wentworth, with his jauntiest air, approached the carriage, not noticing the child.

"How are you, ladies, this morning?" said he, holding out his hand and imprisoning Ruth's fingers in his strong ones.

Then he noticed the child, and gave him a warning look.

Hilda saw it, but Ruth, not acquainted with the situation, and being innocent of any deception, drew her hand from his.

"Nice little boy you have," commented the man, hoping that the child would fail to recognize him.

"Yes, Mr. Wentworth," said Ruth, "this is a little fellow Hilda and I have taken an interest in. Can you not shake hands with the gentleman, Midge?"

The child measured the length of the man with his great starry eyes. Then a sneer stole over his face.

"Dat ain't Mr. Wentworth," shouted he, in a high treble voice. "It am der bloke what left his good friend fer dead, Mr. Richard Gerson."

"The child mistakes me for some one else," said the man, smiling sickly into the faces of the ladies. "I am Mr. Frank Wentworth, my boy."

"Like 'ell you are!" said Midge, forgetting that he had promised not to swear.

"Ruth, you believe me, do you not?" and Hilda noted that the girl was the one to whom he made his first appeal for belief. Ruth did not answer, but took Hilda's hand in hers.

"The child may have made a mistake. You certainly would not take the name of a dead man, or even of a living one, would you?" said she.

There was such an appeal in the voice that the man thought he discerned the ring of love in it.

"It is a lie the child has told. Why he should have invented it is more than I can tell."

"'Cause it's true," grunted the boy, as he nestled closer to the yellow-haired woman. Hilda was holding fast to the little hand and pressing it under the cover of her skirt. She was urging the boy to continue.

"Mr. Wentworth is alive," said the child. "I can prove it by Mag and Bill."

"Then we will drive to the house and let him prove it. The time has come for us to stop such a terrible tale."

Into the cab climbed the man and the direction

of the Bowery was taken. Bill Maglone was sitting whittling at his doorstep. Mag came out at the sound of wheels. Now there was Midge snuggled close to that same woman who had wanted the flowers! What next would come to that child?

Gerson sprang from the cab and walked up to Bill, sweeping his hat from his head.

"Be careful what you say, fool," whispered he, making a motion toward the carriage, and then loud enough for the occupants to hear, he went on:

"Come out here, sir, the ladies wish to ask you something."

Dropping his shavings upon the ground the man drawled out a command to his wife to take herself to the house, and sauntered toward the waiting carriage. He deposited a mouthful of tobacco juice upon the street and copied Gerson by sweeping off his hat.

"Can I does anything for the ladies?"

"This child," said Gerson, "says that he knows you. Now, if that is so, will you deny before these ladies that I am otherwise than Mr. Went-

worth? The child says that I am not, and that the true Frank Wentworth lives here in this house. Will you produce him, if it is so?"

The wicked eyes narrowed into the little slit the child knew so well. It was always dangerous for the white skin when such was the case. Back into the loving arms sank the now white Midge.

"It's the boy I know," answered Bill, in cool, measured tones, "and I'll take him, if you please, and I'll teach him not to lie about a good man. There is no such gentleman here as that name, and never has been since this gentleman left the house."

Then there dawned upon the child's mind the fact that the real man had been done away with, and that Bill Maglone was in the plot. But now he was so eager to escape the beating he would get that he caught the hand under the voluminous ruffles and held on to it. Bill reached to lift the child out, but Hilda, paled by the pathos in the startled eyes, held up her hand.

"I want him to buy me some flowers, sir," said she, not releasing her hold upon the child. "He

knows just what I want. I will send him home with the money, if you will let him go."

Gerson came forward. He reached for the boy. "I will get you the flowers, Mrs. Brittle," said he. "The child will only be in the way."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Wentworth," answered Hilda, not heeding the imperative look in the eyes of the man. "No one can purchase flowers like the child."

Bill was giving in. No harm had come by the tattling of Midge. The storm had blown over, and the beating would wait. Why not let the kid make a quarter if he could? It would buy the drinks for the evening.

Ruth petitioned that the child should go with them, and Gerson had to admit that he was defeated. The thought flashed through his mind that Ruth did not believe the story Bill had told. She was so cold, and then why should she stroke the curls of that miserable boy?"

As they slowly drove along toward the corner, the man excused himself and when the party was out of sight, went back.

He met the man, whittling as carelessly as ever.

"That kid almost fixed me," Gerson said, gloomily. "He has too long a tongue. Look here, whose kid is he, anyway?"

"I don't know," replied Bill. "A woman came here one night and died, leaving the kid. She said that the papers she left were to be sent to a certain man, but as der old woman decided to keep the kid she burned the letters."

"That was not wise. They might have meant a lot of money to you."

A wobbly head, covered with short grey locks, inside the window, raised as Mag heard these words. With the cunning of her kind she went into the other room and took a bunch of letters and an official-looking document from a box and put them safely under a plank in the floor. Some time after she saw Bill fumbling with the box. She knew that the words of the man had taken root. When he asked her what became of the letters and papers she said, with a conviction of truth in her tone, that she had burned them long ago. The man believed it, and the thought that

Midge might be worth something faded from his mind.

He went into the cellar where the man was still fastened to a table-leg. Mag had fixed a place for him to rest, and he was sleeping.

"Wake up," shouted Bill. "I want to talk to you. Gerson has been here and the fact of it is, that he is trying to get your money and your girl. Now, if you will give me more than he will, I will let you go and help you along."

The dazed, sleepy look was fading from his eyes, and Frank Wentworth sat up.

"What are you talking about? Bribing a man that you might sell your soul? Miserable dog, I would rather stay in this place until I rot before I would give you blood money."

"Oh, you would, would you? Well, I think after a time of it youse won't be so pert. Don't youse know dat I could finish you in just twenty minutes?"

The trap-door was open, and Bill could hear Mag moving uneasily about.

"You can kill me," the woman heard the sick

man say, "but the law will require my life at your hands."

"The law will have to find it out first, my rooster," sneered Bill. "Now, you takes youse choice; I want to get through with this business."

Frank Wentworth laid his weary head upon his hand. Was it right to buy his freedom and pay the money into the hands of his murderer? But what was it the fellow had said about Ruth? He had said that his girl was in danger of being harmed by Gerson. But he could not sacrifice his manhood for even the girl he loved.

CHAPTER XI.

HILDA BRITTLE made up her mind not to allow Midge to go again to the Bowery home. She was afraid that the man would kill him for the part he had taken in the Gerson matter. She knew the child was speaking the truth, but did not dare to let Ruth know it. She had made up her mind, though, that if it came to the test she would tell what she knew.

She confided in Ruth that she wanted to take the child home with her. They drove up the avenue, and Midge wondered why they did not stop at the flower store. On and on, up the broad avenue, the prancing horses made their way. The women were silent and the boy happy. He would rather ride, with the white hand holding his, than be home on the Bowery.

That evening the child confided in the loving ear of Hilda that he thought they had harmed the real Frank Wentworth.

"They may have put him in the vault under the house," ventured the child. "Do you think they would do such a thing?"

"I do not know," absently replied Hilda. "Who are you, little Midge? Can you not tell me something of your mother?"

"She's dead," answered the child; "I know that, for I heard Mag tell Mr. Frank that she came with me one winter night and died almost right away. There were some letters, but der old woman burned dem up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep."

"I wonder if there would be any chance of your getting hold of them?" said Hilda.

"I might steal 'em, if you want me to; I wouldn't mind."

Hilda drew the fair head toward her. She already loved the little man.

"We won't let you steal them, little lad," said she, "for now you are going to be my boy you will have to be the best child in the world."

The promise was readily given, and long hours after the child slept the woman sat beside him

and wove in fantastic figures the months of the life which would follow for them both.

Ruth, too, came in and sat with Hilda and they talked over the situation. Both women believed that something had happened to the young man.

Ruth wanting to know the truth, the girls determined to send for Mr. Brittle and abide by his calm judgment.

So, although he had much business on hand, Tom came at the call of his wife, and around the bad man, Gerson, was woven a net which would so entangle him that he would not be able to escape from it.

* * * * * * *

Frank Wentworth was rather sorry that he had not taken the offer of the wretch. The more he thought, the more his heart went out to the lovely girl that he had loved all these long years. Oh, to see her again! To be with her! Suddenly, as a light from Heaven, came the thought that maybe the aunt had lied to him in that dreadful letter, and Ruth might not be the wife of another! The longer he thought the more than likely seemed the idea. Maybe she was thinking

of him and wondering why he had not returned to her.

That night, when Mag brought him his dinner, he asked her what it was that her husband had been trying to tell him. Was it really a young girl waiting for him, and what was her name?

"She are a good-looking girl, if it be the one I saw," wheedled the old woman; "and if you will give in to Bill, he will let you out. You can spare the money from the fortune you have been left."

"I do not know anything about it. Do you and your husband mean to keep me here until I consent?"

"That is about the size of it, I think," said the woman, as she let the trap-door down with a snap.

Would no one miss him? What about the little Midge? Then Frank decided that no one knew he was there.

Bill came home drunk, accompanied by Gerson, who said he would have a talk with the prisoner.

Opening the trap-door the self-appointed heir descended into the room below, with a shudder.

He could not bear the thought of appearing before the accusing eyes of the captive man. Lifting the candle high above his head he looked about.

Frank opened his eyes and saw the intruder. Something significant certainly was meant about the visit or the man would not be there.

"Have you come to torture me in my agony?" asked Frank.

"No; only to talk some sense into your stubborn head. I do not want to have trouble with you, but you should not have virtually died the way you did, making it imperative that I should step into your place and become Frank Wentworth. Now, then, this is what I want you to do. Your health is poor and you cannot bear the strain of close confinement much longer. If you stay in this place it will mean a grave for sure this time. So you might as well understand that I will not allow you to escape until I have had my own way. I intend to marry Ruth Ferris."

A groan deep and long escaped the lips of the confined man. He passed his hand over his face

in a way which would indicate that the tears were very near the surface.

"That is more than I can stand, Dick."

The old loving name fell from the lips with the past intonation.

"You will have to bear it, for she has already consented to become my wife. I will admit that she was true to you for years, but you know that she now thinks you are dead."

This lie about Ruth having promised to be another's wife served to cause the sick man great agony. Why had he wasted so many precious years and months? Why had he not found his darling and taken her to his heart long ago?

"If you will give up your claim upon your name," began Gerson, "I will see that you go away without any more trouble. Your word is all I want. I know of old that you will not lie. Will you give me your promise?"

Now, Frank Wentworth's mother had taught him that to swear was one of the worst crimes a boy could commit. He had never lost his temper enough to use profane language, but here in this lonely vault, with the flickering of a dirty

candle, he ejaculated, as he dropped upon the old mattress which Mag had arranged:

"I'll be damned if I do! I'll trust to luck, and I'll yet see you behind the bars."

Gerson uttered an oath, and, blowing out the candle, he guided himself up the narrow stairs.

* * * * * * *

Brittle found his wife anxious to see him. Midge had been given a scouring, his beautiful curls arranged by the maid and the little white suit standing out straight and stiff.

Tom laughed as, taking the youngster in his arms, he kissed the pink face with satisfaction.

"Certainly, he is a winner," said the big fellow to Hilda, who displayed Midge with pride.

"He is not going to swear any more," said she; "are you Midge? And then when he goes to school all the children will think he is such a nice boy."

"What did the old people think of giving him up to you?" asked Brittle.

"I didn't ask them, I just took him," answered Hilda, innocently, giving Midge another kiss.

Brittle went into fits of laughter. Hilda flushed, while the boy looked surprised.

"Why, little woman," said Tom, as soon as he could get his breath, "they will be after you for kidnapping before the day is out. You can't take a person's child without asking."

Midge drew nearer to Hilda.

"Do I have to go back?" whimpered he, bobbing his curls about before the glass with pride. "I don't like Mag and Bill, now that Mr. Frank is gone."

"If you go, little lad," Brittle said assuringly, "you shall come back again. We will go with him and get papers of release."

With a sinking heart Midge and Hilda, in the cab beside Tom, drove to the slums.

Mag and Bill were speculating upon the advisability of hunting for the child at all. They were afraid of calling the attention of the police to their illicit money factory under the walk.

Then Wentworth would be found and all their plans ruined. In Mag's mind floated the scene of her childhood. The river which ran along the Irish home appealed to her sense more than anything else. If the young man in the cellar could be made to understand that he must come

to their terms, all would be well. But a more obdurate man could not be found. Gerson had not come again, and all the torturing of the hidden man had been done by Bill, added to Mag's coaxing.

Brittle and Hilda, holding tightly to Midge's hand, walked into the shanty.

"Oh, you're back, are you, kid?" sneered Mag, trying to put her hand upon the child's arm. "It's about time you came back and did the work for youse poor mother."

Brittle lifted his hand with a gesture of impatience. Midge only tightened his grasp upon the white fingers, which gave back an answering pressure.

"Have you any papers about the parentage of this child?" asked Tom. "If you have, it will be to your advantage to produce them."

"The child was left here one dark night by its mother. She is dead and Midge has been here ever since."

"Then she left some letters or something. I will give you one hundred dollars to give them to me."

"Don't want to give up the kid," obstinately said the hag, with a sidelong glance at Bill, who had remained quiet during the interview.

"But you will be made to give him up," said Brittle, sharply, "so you might as well get some good out of it. If the court takes him away or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, you will get nothing. Now, what do you say? May I have the papers for one hundred dollars?"

"You may have the kid for that price," drawled Bill.

"No, I am not buying flesh," said Tom. "You have some letters; these you will give to me."

Bill looked at Mag. She gave him a knowing wink. Together they stepped into the yard.

"You'd better give the kid for the money," said the man; "and if youse got any papers, hand 'em over."

Mag entered the house again and went mysteriously into the inner room, where she and Bill slept.

Then, coming out, she knelt upon the floor,

loosened a board and shoved her hand into the opening.

Suddenly a long, deep groan fell upon the ear of the eager watchers. Brittle stepped upon Hilda's foot to enjoin silence. Midge was too well trained to move a lash.

So the incident passed unnoticed. Mag drew out the bunch of papers and hastily slammed down the plank.

"Now, you'll give me the money 'fore you get dese," said she, sullenly.

"I must first be assured that they are the ones I want."

Mag gingerly unfolded the package of letters, took out a little slip and placed it in Brittle's hand.

This is what he read:

"When I am dead, notify Tom Brittle, 48 Wall street, and tell him I stole the little golden-haired child from a woman on the train.

"AGNES BRITTLE."

For a few moments Tom Brittle looked so dazed at the paper in his hand that Hilda thought

he was ill. She leaned over and murmured, "Dear Tom, has anything happened?"

The answer was the slip. Hilda read, with mingled emotions, the little deathbed plea, knowing full well that she had recovered her child.

"He is mine after all, Tom," screamed she, gathering Midge into her close embrace. "My little lost Dicky! Oh, my baby, my baby!"

Still Tom Brittle did not move. Back into the past, like a glint of vivid lightning in the sky, went his mind, to that little sister, Agnes, and the awful uncertainty of her fate. How the dear mother had mourned her as dead! None knew where she had gone. And all these years she was lying in Potter's Field!

Mechanically he handed out the five twenty dollar bills to Mag. Then he opened the letters and for a long time read, read with tears coursing down his cheeks, his heart filled with pain.

There was no mistake about the dead woman, and Hilda knew that she had found her child. Only Midge kept his eye upon the board where the groan came from, and through the alert,

childish mind swept the idea that Frank Wentworth was being held there against his will.

He did not dare to mention the fact, but waited until they were safely out of doors.

Brittle asked many questions about the girl who had tottered into the house those years ago, and had died before help could be brought her. Mag made the most of her action and the care which had been given the child.

Brittle handed her four hundred dollars more, as appreciation, before going, making her sign a receipt and also a release upon the child.

Midge watched with large, wondering eyes the transaction, not understanding it all. He only knew that a pair of tense white arms were about his neck, and passionate kisses were ever being showered upon his little upturned mouth.

"Do you understand, little boy," whispered Hilda, "that you are my very own little lost baby? That I am your mother?"

"Thank youse," answered Midge, gravely. "I wants a mother. Mine is dead," and Midge pointed a little finger in the direction of the river.

"But I am your own mother, Midge; it was not yours that died; I was your mother when you were a little baby. And a poor, sick girl stole you from me. I will never let my little Dicky go away again."

Lovingly did the mother repeat over the name, while she smoothed back the curls which covered the little head.

Brittle was talking about the woman, gleaning all the news he could for the little Puritan mother of the dead up in the hills of New York.

Mag wanted to keep the money after the carriage had driven away, but Bill simply held out his hands, and the bills were transferred.

"Did you hear the noise he made when I opened the board?" asked Mag, jerking her finger in the direction of the trap.

"I think I did," answered Bill, "and I'll see that he don't do it again."

"What is youse going to do?" asked Mag, laying a detaining hand upon Bill's arm.

"Going to close his trap forever!"

Mag shuddered as she saw Bill take the heavy

thongs from the hook. His face was awful to behold.

Should she allow him to enter that lower room and torture the youth in his distress? When Mag made up her mind she generally had her way.

"Now, don't do anything like dat, Bill," argued she, "fer I ain't goin' back to Killarney wid de death groans of a fellow a-ringing in my ears. Don't do it, Bill."

But the man was determined. He snapped the long whip within close proximity of his wife's face, and with a sneer strode to the trap-door.

"If youse hurts him," said she, with a fearful oath, "then I will bring dis ax down upon youse pate 'fore you leaves him dead."

Still Bill kept on. He opened the door and commenced to descend the steps heavily.

Mag was as good as her word. She raised the ax in her hand to let it fall upon the old grey head as it disappeared, but the weapon of death was caught from behind. Mag turned and looked into the flashing eyes of Richard Gerson.

CHAPTER XII.

As the Brittles rolled away toward Broadway, Midge suddenly spoke: "I t'inks they have Mr. Frank in the counterfeiters' cellar."

Brittle called for the coachman to wait, as he conferred with Hilda.

"We ought not to leave a fellow being in a place like that. Maybe they will make away with him now before help will come."

"Then let's go back," said Hilda, bravely. "I am willing, and especially if it might be Ruth's Frank. I am so happy, darling, now, that my heart is singing all the time. I would see my little friend as happy as I am."

Brittle called a policeman standing on the corner and related the occurrence to him. The officer called two more and Brittle piloted the way to the hovel they had just left.

* * * * * * *

Gerson, in taking the ax from the hand of Mag

and the scuffle that followed, caused Bill to reappear again from the cellar.

"What's the racket?" yelled he, and then, seeing Gerson, he sat down to tell the story.

Midge was the son of Hilda, then, making the boy his child, so thought Gerson. For a moment the better depths stirred in the man's heart. He could remember the shock he had received when first seeing the child. It must have been the relation between them, and the striking likeness to the girl he himself had ruined.

"Now the kid has gone, what are you going to do with him?" pointing toward the cellar.

"Finish him and take the body away to-night. I ain't going to be bothered any more wid him."

Gerson started. This was what he wanted. To be rid of the man would be Heaven, indeed.

"I will give you ten thousand dollars if you put him out of the world by morning."

Bill's eyes glittered. Such an amount had never been placed within his grasp before. How much could be done, and, as Mag said, they would return to their old home and give up the dangerous business of making bad money.

"I'll do the job," said he, with a satisfied grunt.

"When?"

"As soon as the old woman goes to sleep. She is a buggy wench."

Mag was crooning over a pail of beer, which had stood for some time, but it was all the same to her perverted taste.

"My position is a dangerous one," went on Gerson, "and with that man living, I am not safe."

Together they went into the cellar with the smoky little candle. Frank lay on his side, sleeping. He groaned as the light flashed into his face.

"You got company, Mr. Frank," said Bill, laying stress upon the name as they had all heard Midge do; "a gentleman to see youse on business."

"To settle your hash, once for all, Wentworth," sneered Gerson. "You are not to have your own way any longer."

"Am I to be killed?" asked Frank, wishing that he had come to Bill's terms, and yet hating himself for the thought.

"Youse is going to have a chance for youse

life," said Bill, and Gerson looked at the man, wonderingly.

"He is goin' to fight youse, Mr. Gerson," began Bill, with a wink; "his muscles are so strong dat dere ain't no chance for youse." Bill blinked heavily his vile eyes and Gerson burst into loud laughter.

"Now, then, we will start," and Bill unloosened the chain which had cut deeply into the leg of Frank.

Suddenly Ruth flashed into the sick man's mind. Gerson had lied to him; she would not take him as her husband. Now he knew that he had been deceived all along and that the wicked old woman now in her grave had told him a falsehood in the letter she had called confidential.

He rose to his feet, staggering for the want of strength. His strong face shining in the flickering flame caused Bill to grunt.

"I'll see dat there is fair play fer once," whispered he; "the bloke sha'n't be de one to cheat."

Frank in his weakness grasped the big body of Gerson. Like a child he was thrown upon the stone floor. Gerson's knee was upon his breast.

They all heard a commotion upstairs, and Mag appeared at the entrance of the hole.

"The cops is here, Bill," whispered she; "the cops is here."

"Give me your knife, Bill," demanded Gerson. "I will fix this throat so it won't tell on me."

But fate had willed a better ending for the unhappy Frank.

Two officers pulled the fighting man from his breast, while in a struggle with Bill the latter was shot. Brittle raised Frank from his position and almost carried him into the open day. There Midge greeted him with tears of joy.

"She is my own mudder from the baby days," said he, pointing proudly to Hilda, and she, anxious over her friend waiting for news of a lover which never came, asked him about Ruth, and if he had ever known such a girl.

"I have always loved her," sobbed Frank, weak from his trial," but thank God, I shall see her soon."

It did not take the party long to get to the Mathers' home.

Ruth little knew what happiness was in store for her.

All the morning she had restlessly walked the floor, waiting for the return of the Brittles. She was so glad for the little, loving mother-heart that Hilda had found some child to take the place of her own lost darling. She did not yet know that Midge was the little lost Dick.

She walked up and down the room in anxiety. The very vibration of the air seemed to tell her something had happened. Hilda was now running up the stairs, with Midge by the hand.

The sight of the pale girl reduced her to tears.

"Darling Ruth," cried she, "this little lad is my own baby, and poor Tom found in the woman who took Dicky, his own sister. We are going to have her taken from Potter's Field and brought to the family plot. She was deceived by a man and her baby died. Tom's people never knew what became of her."

"Yep, and," shouted Dicky, willing to tell all the news, "you does not——" Hilda placed her hand over the little mouth. She chided the child, and the youngster subsided, sitting like a little

drum-major, watching with big eyes as the two women cried in each other's arms.

"I'm so glad that you are happy, Hilda. If my lot were only as easy! I have no faith in that awful man who is constantly urging me to be his wife, and yet I cannot be impolite and let him know that I think he is masquerading under false colors."

"Dat's what he was," shouted the irrepressible Dick.

"Hush, Dicky, dear," again chided the gentle mother.

"If I only knew that Frank were well, and not in trouble," whispered Ruth, "I would be happy. The summer will seem so long again. I think I shall go to Europe."

"And take me, too, and mama, and the big papa?" this from Dicky, who could not see why he could not talk as he wanted to, to his new Aunt Ruth. Then came the last and the best. Ruth had suffered long and much. It is well before closing this story of human love and human woes to give the brave little heroine her happiness.

Hilda took the girl by the arm and led her to the music room.

"I want you to play for me, dear," said she, "for I am so happy to-night."

Ruth sat at the piano, not knowing that a very tall, pale young man was standing looking at her. She played on for a few moments, singing that old-time song,

"The hours I've spent with you, dear heart,
Are as a string of pearls to me,"

when a sound at the back of the room, strangely like a human groan, aroused her from the little dirge-like melody she was playing.

Into her dark eyes were looking two darker ones. Into a pair of waiting arms the girl glided. She needed no one to tell her who the being was; her heart had fastened itself upon the rock, and Ruth was happy at last!

"And I have waited for you so many years!" sobbed she, stroking the pale face. "And what have they done with that dreadful man?"

"We will not speak of him any more," said

Frank, "for with his own hand he ended a bad life."

Hilda and Brittle crept in. Dicky was prancing for joy as he saw the two, Ruth and Frank, in each other's arms.

"Ain't dat nice, old bloke?" he asked lovingly of Frank. "She am der daisy in the locket."

"Yes, I have back my darling, thanks to you," said Frank, and Hilda and Tom left the lovers to their happiness.

Dicky was being put to bed. His little face was snuggled into the pillows, and after he had fallen asleep his father and mother stood over the child.

"Isn't he a beautiful youngster?" said Tom, with pride. "I wish we had a little fellow of our own, dear."

Hilda's face covered with blushes as she returned: "Dearest, if lots of little children play about us and call us by the dearest names in the world, we will" (and here Hilda stooped and kissed the shining yellow hair) "we will never forget this dear little Child of the Slums."

THE END.

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